

God Needs Journalists

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It has been about a decade now since an article in the Washington Post asserted with stunning casualness that Christians in America tended to be “poor, uneducated” and “easy to command.” For a while, the Post was overwhelmed by a blizzard of faxes—Ph.D. certificates and income-tax returns sent in by irate Christians to underline the silliness of this generalization. But for many evangelicals and charismatics, the stereotyping seemed to bear out a prevailing suspicion that the mainstream U.S. media was hopelessly bigoted against Christians.

There were statistics to support this conviction, too.

Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman’s much-quoted 1980 survey of attitudes held by top journalists of elite news organizations, such as the major networks, Time magazine and others, revealed how startlingly nonreligious, indeed anti-religious, many of these journalists were.

It showed that only 14 percent of journalists attended religious services once a month or more, in contrast with 40 percent of the U.S. population who went to church or synagogue at least once a week. A full 50 percent of journalists denied having any religious affiliation, in contrast with more than 75 percent of ordinary Americans who actually identified themselves as Christians.

Conservative Christians had a field day publicizing the Lichter and Rothman findings, since they seemed to justify the suspicions they harbored toward “secular” journalism.

Well, things change.

Re-examining the field in 1995, sociologist Lichter found that religion in America was being reported on far more fully than before and that reporters had changed significantly in their attitudes toward religion. His new survey of elite media reporters showed that the number of journalists attending religious services once a month or more had more than doubled, from 14 percent to 30 percent, and that the numbers of journalists disavowing any religious affiliation at all had dropped from 50 percent to 22 percent.

While no one was saying that a religious revival was occurring among the media, something was happening. Of course, there is still a long way to go. Only one main TV network, ABC News, has a full-time religion correspondent, Peggy Wehmeyer.

Despite this still challenging situation, evangelical and charismatic Christians can do much to push the process of change even further. One thing is to stop complaining about the media and start supporting the small but steadily growing group of Christians who make their career in secular journalism. Another is to encourage Christian students at Christian and secular colleges to consider secular journalism as a possible life's calling.

Regent University professor and regular newspaper columnist Terry Mattingly has for six years directed a summer course in Washington, D.C., called the Capstone Program. It accepts

about 15 of the best students from the 95-member Council of Christian Colleges and Universities. They hear close to 25 of the best print and electronic journalists in Washington and New York—all of them committed Christians—tell how God has equipped and led them in the reporter's calling. As many as a third of the students agree to enter journalism after college.

"There is an opportunity here," Mattingly says, "to put a different type of student ." His concern is that, despite the enthusiasm of the students, very few Christian colleges teach journalism seriously, making it difficult to pass on the essential nuts-and-bolts skills to a new generation.

That surely needs to change.

Mattingly and several others have been a great encouragement to me in developing Gegrapha, a growing global fellowship of Christians in journalism (). We currently are planning a major conference for 200-300 Christians in journalism in Washington in August 2001.

Gegrapha means, "I have written." That's something any journalist can say.

Gegrapha is trying to raise such a spirit of truth and awareness of God's truth among journalists that the world will never have to complain again that journalists, well, just don't get it.