

The Price of Truth

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Despite often legitimate complaints by American Christians about anti-Christian bias in the secular media, the fact remains that even when it is blankly uncomprehending of issues of faith, a free press is still one of the best protections of freedom in any society. When freedom of the press is threatened anywhere, along with freedom of conscience, people's lives are at risk.

Nowhere can you grasp this more vividly than in Africa, a continent whose peoples have in recent decades been more brutalized by dictatorship, civil war, corruption and disease than anywhere else on earth.

In mid-November in Nairobi, Kenya, we heard heartrending, firsthand stories of this from 40 journalists, all of them Christian, gathered from 11 African nations. The occasion was the African Regional Conference of Geographa, the global fellowship of Christians in journalism founded in Washington, D.C., in 1998. Some of those journalists present had been forced to flee their homes and their countries because their reporting antagonized their governments or, as in northern Nigeria, an aggressive and expansionist branch of Islam.

Clayton Peel, former deputy editor of The Chronicle in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, was fired overnight from the pro-government paper after front-paging the story of a mayoral candidate cleared in court of malicious and politically motivated corruption charges. Until he left Zimbabwe he did not know if he would be jailed, or worse.

“There does come a point,” Peel said, “when your Christian conscience provokes you, and in being provoked, you provoke others.”

In Nigeria, which returned to democracy two years ago, the most frightening challenge to Christians and journalists is that of efforts by Muslim Nigerians in the country’s north to suppress both Christianity and press freedom by imposing the sharia, Islamic religious law. Emmanuel Hasan (not his real name), editor of a northern regional newspaper, had to flee for his life after bravely reporting anti-Christian violence by militant Nigerian Muslims in his state.

After arriving in Lagos, Hasan did something radical—he founded a Christian newspaper, The Envoy. He had three goals: to report instances of Christian persecution, to look at news from a Christian perspective and to be frank in reporting when the church itself slipped up.

But Hasan was shocked by unexpected opposition. “We didn’t expect the difficulties to come from the church,” he says.

Hasan says many churches became hostile when his paper pointed out wrong-doing or corruption among them. Despite this, Hasan says, the paper became popular with ordinary people because, in his words, “We stood for the truth.”

Truth also disturbs authoritarian governments because it challenges the legitimacy of their power. A journalist familiar with Egypt said he had been surprised by how much fear there was in the Egyptian media about reporting basic true facts.

“We need to challenge ourselves to tell the truth,” he said, but he added, “We need to understand that it is a real danger to tell the truth.”

All the African reporters were aware of the difficulties of press censorship in many of their countries. Some of them also worried about the insidious threat of self-censorship—holding back truth-telling for fear of government violence or some other backlash.

A reporter for an African government news agency repented in public for having often to “slant” the stories she writes. If a government minister has addressed 25 people at a political meeting, she said, almost in tears, she has to write that there was a “mammoth rally” for the government.

Yet the overall mood of the conference was filled with hope. “For all of us in Africa, we can influence our societies if we see ourselves as Christians,” Hasan commented. New Gegrapha chapters of Christian journalists will be formed in several African countries, and there was a sense of deep commitment to support and pray for one another.

Next stop for Gegrapha will be at the regional level, with conferences in South Asia and Europe. Please pray for financially successful Christians to help us accomplish all this.

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