

Don't despair of media 'bias'

IT'S a cliché to say: "Don't believe all you read in the papers!" – yet, for some reason, we often do.

If you've ever read an article about an issue you know about, you'll know that some news stories can be over-simplified, exaggerated, confused or just plain wrong.

We shake our heads at the inaccuracies and swear we'll never believe anything we read again...yet in the next breath we see something in the papers we know little about and assume it to be the gospel truth!

Those contacted by reporters can find it particularly galling if they've been misquoted or the story has been twisted beyond recognition.

That was my feeling after reading a recent double-page spread in *The News*. After two weeks in which our diocesan offices helped a reporter to understand the intricacies of parish share, clergy stipends and pensions, we thought he understood the real story about this diocese's finances.

That is, of course, that in 1994 our Board of Finance anticipated problems with the rising cost of

the big issue



Why is the Church often misrepresented in the media? Is there a conspiracy? Communications adviser Neil Pugmire considers.

clergy stipends and pensions, and put some money aside in a Pensions Transition Fund.

It was invested and is now helping us through several years during which expenditure has shot through the roof. The diocese's net expenditure on clergy stipends, national insurance, council tax and pensions doubled between 1995 and 2005. Unless we paid our clergy less than other dioceses, there was nothing we could do about it.

Yet in that time, increases in parish share have never been more than seven per cent a year. Why? Because we invested our Pensions Transition Fund wisely and that nest-egg has helped us through difficult times. Other dioceses are going through financial crises at the moment because of clergy pensions and stipends. Our diocese is – emphatically – not.

Yet when the story appeared in *The News*, none of this was mentioned. Instead there was a spurious story suggesting that the diocese might sell off church buildings to help meet a financial crisis that doesn't actually exist. It suggested that St George's Church, Portsea, might fetch £1m! And it described the Kairos process as a "year-long review of assets to avert a cash crisis".

There is, of course, no truth in this. The diocese can't sell land it doesn't own, and church buildings are owned by individual parishes. Even if parishes wanted to sell church buildings, they would make little money – all but 24 of our 173 churches are listed, so any buyer would have to keep the exterior as it is. That makes them pretty uninviting prospects. Of course, even if a parish did sell its church,

most of the proceeds would go to care for other redundant churches. And you hardly need telling what the Kairos process is really about!

Of course, we complained. But the damage of a high-profile double-page spread won't be fully repaired by the letter of correction they published. Doubtless you will have examples of the same kind of bad experience from your parish.

The easy thing to do, of course, is to assume that the media are biased against the Church and not worth bothering with. I'd actually suggest that's the wrong response.

Firstly, the media aren't anti-Church. Their conscious or unconscious stance might be on behalf of the "little guy" against the big institution – for instance, they'll be happy to give a voice to a bereaved family who feel unfairly treated by their local vicar. But if your clergy complained about being treated unfairly by the bishop, the local newspaper would probably stick up for them in the same way.

As a journalist myself, I know mistakes are made because of lack of understanding and the pressure of deadlines, not because of a conspiracy. Church stuff is incredibly complicated and a reporter is unlikely to understand what all the

jargon means in one phone call.

Secondly, the "bad news" stories will always get reported. If we ignore the media, it doesn't stop the tiny minority who have bad experiences with the Church going to the press. So, just to restore a semblance of balance, it's important we feed the media with "good news" stories about our work.

And, thirdly, we actually have interesting stories to tell. The media love stories about people, and our pews are full of people we could promote – a youngster off to work abroad for a year, or someone organising a children's holiday club for the 30th year running. These stories can help us to communicate the good news about Jesus to a wider audience than the one in our pews.

Your parish might like to think about appointing a voluntary 'PR officer' who can feed such stories to the media. If so, I'd gladly help with some training. Contact me on 023-9282 5731 or communications @portsmouth.anglican.org

Yes, there are dangers in media liaison. They might get it wrong. We might be misquoted. But what's more likely is that we show how Christianity is relevant to the world outside our church doors.



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