

## *How to handle the media*

It's likely you will get calls from the local media asking for your opinions on the actions of General Convention. Remember that as much as everyone wants to vilify the press, they have an important and critical job. More people will read or see their stories than hear your sermons so see this as an opportunity, not an inconvenience. This is how you can prepare to make the most of this media attention.

### **BEFORE THEY CALL**

- Decide on your message. What do you want to say? What's important to you? What is your position on the issue? If you think about this beforehand, then you'll have a better chance of getting across your message regardless of the questions. Write these down so that you have them in front of you for the interview. You also want to consider that both your parishioners and other people in the community will read what you have to say and may consider it THE position of the Episcopal Church – even if you're only answering for yourself. Speak carefully and wisely.
- What's your sound bite?  
We all know these issues have a long history and are very complicated. Books and tomes have been written – and will be written – on the subject, and you could probably talk for hours about the nuances of the issue. But the reporters and their editors don't care. They have a certain amount of space, and they can't possibly print everything you say. Boil down your message to a few sentences. Elaborate when you're asked but make sure your message doesn't get lost in the explanation.
- Can you really boil the Gospel down to a soundbite?  
Yes. As James Carville and Paul Begala point out in their book *Buck up, Suck up, and Come Back When You Foul Up*, John 3:16 contains all of the basics of the Christian faith: That there is one God, who loves the world, He gave his only Son, anyone who believes has everlasting life.  
That's really it: the basic Christian message in a 15-second statement. In other words, it's a soundbite.
  - So, state your question in no more than 10 words
  - Give your answer to the question in no more than 30 words
  - Then read your question and answer out loud and listen to how it sounds, does it read easily. Ask someone else to listen to you read and tell you what you said.
  - Check for jargon and eliminate it.
  - Check that all of the sentence fragments of your question and answer convey your message so that you can't be quoted out of context. For example. If you say "You could say that, but I believe ...". A clip of you saying just "You could say that" makes it sound like you agree with the interviewer's question.
    - Red flag words to look for are: but, however, never the less, on the other hand.
    - Restate all the fragments so that they positively convey your message
  - Now read, mark, learn and inwardly digest your message

## WHEN THE MEDIA CALLS

- If you're not ready or you're in the middle of something else, ask if you can call back. It's better to give this interview your full attention. It's important and should be given some time. Ask when their deadline is – and respect it. Otherwise, you may not get a call the next time. Before you call, get out your paper where you've written your main points and soundbites. Don't read these but make sure you have them in front of you during the interview. Take a deep breath and call back.
- When being interviewed
  - Listen to the question and decide if you want to answer it as asked. Politicians often reject the premise of the question. For example: The reporter asks, "Why doesn't your church stand for family values?" You say: "The real question is: 'What are Christian family values? I believe they are: love, justice and respect for all people. The Episcopal church stands for those.'"
  - Make each answer an opportunity to restate your message. The more times you say it, the more likely it will make it into the final story.
  - Just because they ask you a question doesn't mean you have to answer it. In most cases, don't say "no comment." Restate your message/soundbite. Don't let them force you to say something with which you're not comfortable.
  - Use positive rather than negative statements. For example, "The real question is ..." rather than "That isn't the question..." Or "I believe that ..." rather than "I don't believe that..."
  - Remember that your word choice is important. For example, the words revenge, retribution and justice all carry different connotations.
- Keep in mind the audience of the media to whom you are speaking
  - Your local newspaper reaches a broad general audience, and generally its copy is at about a sixth grade reading level.
  - National Public Radio reaches an audience that is usually more highly educated than the general population.
  - Top 40 radio stations tend to reach an audience that is younger than the general population.
  - A note about radio: Often a talk radio station is owned by the same corporation as several music stations in the same market. The talk radio station's news staff produce the top and bottom of the hour news for the music stations, so you may be speaking to different audiences in the same interview.
- Keep in mind the media you are working in:
  - Keep in mind that most people listen to the radio and watch TV while doing other things, don't say things that someone who is half-listening won't understand or will misinterpret.
  - Tone of voice doesn't transmit in the paper so avoid irony and sarcasm.
  - Facial expressions don't transmit on radio, so avoid irony and sarcasm.
  - As a matter of fact, avoid irony and sarcasm altogether. It takes a lot of practice and talent to be able to pull off sarcastic wit in the media.
  - Like in preaching, a pace that sounds normal to your ears is too fast; you should sound a little slow to yourself.
  - Be mindful of your facial expressions on television.

- If you are wearing a jacket, pull the coattails down and sit on them. This will keep your jacket from bunching around your shoulders.
- Look at the reporter when he or she is asking you a question and at the camera when you are answering.
- If you look at the top of the lens of the camera and tilt your chin slightly up you will look thinner
- Never, never, never get visibly angry or annoyed with a reporter or walk out of an interview. Just keep calmly redirecting the question back to your message.
- Before you hang up, get the reporter's phone number and/or e-mail address so you contact him/her again if necessary. Offer to read the story before it is printed to make sure the facts are correct. Many reporters will say no, but you can always offer. You may want to point out that the process and history of some of these issues can be complicated and confusing and that you're willing to help make sure the facts are correct.
- If you're having a special event to discuss the General Convention issues – or something else exciting – make sure to mention it to the reporter and invite the public. It can't hurt to encourage people to come to our churches.
- If you're uncomfortable with the media, encourage them to contact Richelle Thompson at 740.250.3575. We will post regular press releases on the website and send them to the area media. We also will post statements from Bishop Price.

#### **AFTER THE MEDIA CALLS:**

- If you've forgotten something important, call the reporter back. They would rather have too much information than not enough. If you've made a factual error, call them back and correct the information. Don't call them to change your comments.
- When the story appears, there may be errors. Sometimes they are significant factual errors that should be corrected. Call and ask to speak to the reporter. If you feel the reporter is ignoring your concerns, talk to the editor. You may also be disappointed that the reporter didn't include everything you hoped would appear in the story. That's why it's important to keep repeating your message. Remember the story likely includes comments from several sources, and it would be impossible to include everything you said.
- Remember everyone makes errors. Decide if this is a ditch you want to die in – or a bridge/reporter you want to burn. Sometimes you just say it was close enough and you let the small errors slide. The next time you talk to the reporter, you may want to make sure the information is correct by saying, "I noticed this information was slightly off in the last story, and I wanted to make sure you had the correct information ...". Saying it graciously is helpful. Being snide is not.
- Congratulate yourself for handling a difficult situation with grace. Remember that people in the community and the church will look to you as an example of how to respond in this difficult time. You have the opportunity to set the tone and direction.