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The 4/2018 issue of *Media Development* will explore today's world of digital communications and their impact on societies everywhere.

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Matters pending

Finally, I would like to make a brief reference to some of the permanent matters pending, because they have to be always present on the agenda.

Firstly, WACC's relationship with the churches. It must be possible to find a way to be closer to the churches. They need to know that they can count on WACC. The churches, whose communication work has always been essential to mission, do not always realize the very nature of today's communication.

Secondly, the importance of networking. It is necessary to be closer to all authentic communication; to have a closer relationship with the academic world, at the regional and global level; a closer relationship with women's initiatives. It is necessary to appreciate the responsible way in which women are carrying out their work in communication. Their ability to relate to each other, to establish networks and be involved in concrete form of actions in defence of their rights are remarkable.

Thirdly, to open doors to young communicators. Young people are, more and more, attracted by new technologies. The number of young people who want to dedicate their energies to communication is constantly increasing. The training of future leaders will continue to be a high priority.

As was affirmed in the Mexico Declaration (WACC Congress 1995), "To be human is to communicate. Communication makes relationship possible. Through communication humanity can intensify its struggle against dehumanization so that the oikumene – the whole inhabited world – may realize dignity and grace." ■

Carlos A. Valle, a Methodist minister from Argentina, was WACC General Secretary 1986-2001. A former President of INTERFILM, the Protestant film organization, Valle was a staff member of the ecumenical theological school, ISIDET, in Buenos Aires, where he taught various courses on communication, especially film and theology. Upon retiring, Carlos returned to Argentina to serve as a chaplain to students at ISIDET in Buenos Aires, where he continues to write on issues related to communication, to work for his church, and to take an active part in promoting communication rights and social justice. Valle has written several books, published in both Spanish and English. They include *Comunicación es evento* (1988), *Comunicación: modelo para armar* (1990), and *Communication and Mission: In the Labyrinth of Globalisation* (2002).

What is Christian communication in the face of widespread exposure of abusive Christianity?

Peter Horsfield

The recent public exposure of extensive sexual abuse of children and adults by Christian leaders, and its prolonged cover-up by other Christian leaders, has arguably had a greater impact on the current public standing and perception of Christianity than any other single factor in the past century.

A significant part of this impact lies in the fact that the exposure has not been due to Christian churches taking the initiative to embody their own beliefs and to act publicly in line with the moral behaviour they demand of others. The exposure has been brought about by courageous victims refusing to be silenced and intimidated by Christian authorities, and by secular civil agencies such as journalism, the law, and political enquiries persisting in the face of strong resistance from churches, to expose the extensive criminal and abusive ethos of the religion.

The extent of the abuse and its exposure have been global. For the first time, tens of thousands of vulnerable living people on every continent have been given support against the intimidation of powerful religious institutions to name the abuse they were subject to and to speak publicly about the impacts of that abuse. And for the tens of thousands of others still alive who haven't spoken publicly, they have seen for the first time their experience named publicly as a basis for re-

building their lives.

Many in churches attempt to dismiss the significance of this on a variety of grounds: that the abuse was just a few bad apples in the barrel; or was primarily in just one branch of Christianity; or that Christian leaders were acting with the best intentions in line with social understanding and expectations of the time; or that many Christian leaders were kept in the dark and weren't aware of it; or that Christian leaders were trying to balance the good of all; or that focusing just on abuse and ignoring all the good that Christianity has done is a biased perspective. These excuses ignore both the accounts and the data on the extent of the abuse, its devastating personal effects, its presence in all branches of Christianity, and the complicity in the abuse at all levels of functional and representative Christian leadership.

Identity and integrity

For Christianity as it has been traditionally embodied in organised churches, the exposure presents a critical question of identity and integrity for its members. If those appointed or elected to define and represent the core character and ethos of the religion are found to be living by another ethos, does the ethos itself have any integrity? The diminishing involvement of people in Christian institutional activities is an augury of this loss of confidence.

For Christianity as it seeks to present or communicate itself in the public sphere, the exposure has diminished the social capital of selflessness and good will with which Christian communications were previously received. This was apparent in a public debate between Cardinal George Pell and Richard Dawkins on the Australian television current affairs program Q&A several years ago. Cardinal Pell began one of his responses by saying, "I remember when I was in England we were preparing some young English boys" At this point the studio audience began laughing and the camera cut to Richard Dawkins smiling. Pell tried to continue by saying, "Preparing them" at which point the audience began booing and the Moderator was forced to intervene by saying to the audience, "Come on."

The incident brings to the fore two dimensions of Christian communication. One is the communication that is attempted through the words of appointed Christian authorities in crafted statements and symbolic actions. The other is the communication that takes place through actions. What the sexual abuse scandal has brought to public awareness is that there has been a vast discrepancy between the two and the social and political power that has been claimed or conceded to Christian institutions, particularly in the global west and south, is not worthy.

Previously such highlights of the discrepancies and destructiveness of religion were dismissed as being simply expressions of a few militant or pathological anti-religious partisans. The exposure of extensive and sanctioned sexual abuse within Christian institutions is shifting the sentiment for an increasing number of people away from the intellectual to the existential and it is becoming apparent that an increasing number of national populations are reading or hearing what is communicated by Christian institutions in a less deferential, less preferential, more informed way. Christian churches have contributed significantly to this by their responses to the exposure. A number of aspects of this response are noteworthy.

Wealth protection

The overriding message being communicated by church responses to sexual abuse is that Christianity's primary concern is to protect its wealth and look after its leaders. Just one example: during its investigations from 2013 to 2017, the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse brought to public attention the Australian Catholic Church's response to a claim for compensation brought by John Ellis, a former altar boy abused by a priest in the 1970s.

When Ellis brought his complaint and claim to the Sydney archdiocese in 2002, the archdiocese, then led by Cardinal Pell, acknowledged the abuse and offered him \$25,000 in compensation. Ellis rejected the offer and proposed a settlement of \$100,000. The archdiocese dismissed Ellis's proposal and then spent eight times that amount fighting him in court, arguing successfully that the

Catholic Church could not be sued because it did not exist as an entity. After winning the case, the church threatened to pursue Ellis for its legal costs until public opposition caused them not to proceed. Various political steps are now being taken to change the law that exempts some churches from legal accountability.

One of the reasons the Catholic Church in Australia gave for fighting the level of compensation given to victims of abuse was to maintain its extensive welfare work. However a recent investigation by The Age newspaper found that the Catholic Church in Australia had property and financial assets in excess of \$30 billion and that its welfare work was largely tax-payer, not church funded. The newspaper investigation found that the Catholic Church in the state of Victoria has assets in excess of \$9 billion, and at the time the church was in a legal battle with two parents seeking fair compensation for the sexual abuse of their two daughters as children by a priest, one of whom suicided and the other suffered brain damage through self-harm.

The Church spent \$2.25 million buying a mansion in an exclusive suburb for its archbishop's residence, and another \$872,000 on a beach house with bay views for the archbishop's exclusive recreational use. In the U.S.A., where the church is not immune from legal challenge, according to a 2012 report in The Economist some churches have been transferring church funds into unrelated trusts to protect them, while drawing on employee's retirement funds to meet enforced settlement costs.

A second overriding public perception from churches' responses to revelations of sexual abuse is that churches are not willing to be honest and transparent, are cowardly, and are concerned primarily for their own interests. As a result, the message is being perceived that churches and church leaders are not trustworthy. In dealing with the challenges and ramifications of the exposure of sexual abuse, with scant if any theological reflection, church leaders have adopted corporate crisis-management tactics in dealing with the issue. Using their corporate resources, church leaders commonly employ legal advisers, finan-

cial advisers, public relations consultants or crisis management experts to "handle" the crisis.

Acting on this advice, church leaders commonly avoid acknowledging any fault, avoid saying anything clearly in a unambiguous way, issue apologies that are crafted to avoid acknowledgment and acceptance of responsibility and promise that action is being taken to address the problem to ensure it doesn't happen again. Symbolic actions are created to make it appear that the church has compassion, such as papal or presidential pastoral meetings with abuse survivors that are carefully controlled to ensure only compliant and appreciative church members are present while keeping outside others who have been screwed over by the system.

The third dominant message communicated by Christianity's handling of its sexual abuse is the hypocritical disconnect between public statements and behaviour of its leaders in related issues such as sexual harassment of women and equality of recognition for loving homosexual relationships. This was illustrated recently in the behaviour and pronouncements of Australia's former Deputy Prime Minister. He was a leading opponent of the move to legalise gay marriage, arguing as a father and a Christian that doing so would undermine the importance of marriage and the family which were the foundations of society.

Four months after the legislation was passed (with the support of more than 60% of the population), the self-acknowledged Christian Deputy Prime Minister was revealed as having a long affair with a staffer, who was now pregnant by him (he questioned that for a period), for whom he had found well-paid employment in the offices of a number of ministerial colleagues, and for whom he had left his wife and four daughters to live with in a rent-free apartment provided for him by a wealthy businessman in his electorate.

Coincidental with these exposures, we see worldwide a declining public involvement in Christian institutional activities, the rise of de-institutionalised religion, and the rise of Christianity as a "benefit" religion. Is there any redemption for churches in responding to this situation in a way that can be communicated?

Honesty and remorse

A number of years ago, as the issue of sexual abuse within churches was beginning to break in Australia and I became involved as an advocate on behalf of victims, I proposed that the issue gave churches a unique opportunity in the way it responded to the situation to model and communicate the core of its beliefs about how wrong-doing is restored. One was in what was said – telling the truth honestly about what was done, not in corporate doublespeak, acknowledging the wrong and showing genuine remorse. The other was in what was done – paying to restore the damage and to reaffirm the integrity of the victims and taking clear and transparent action to ensure that the wrong does not happen again. These are the only basis for genuine forgiveness to take place. Obviously not much notice was taken.

I think it is not too late for churches to respond and communicate effectively, but the price now is much higher. I propose therefore a radical, penitent Christian redemptive action.

All churches should give a tithe – a tenth of their property assets and financial investments – for the creation of an independent foundation, free of any church connections or control and headed by highly respected community leaders, to address, remedy the damage and restore those who are victims of sexual abuse as children.

A tithe seems like a large amount. For the Roman Catholic Church in Australia it would be a tithe of \$3 billion. For other churches, maybe \$100 million. Some would say that it's impossible and unrealistic, but it's manageable by selling assets that are empty or under-utilised and reducing the size of churches' investment reserves and it's slowly being dragged out of them by the secular legal system anyway. And if Jesus is to be believed, churches are being unfaithful to their beliefs by holding such a large amount of wealth and it would provide a powerful witness to a capitalist dominated global economy.

The money would be used through the foundation to develop and provide comprehensive information and services that allowed victims/survivors of abuse perpetrated in silence and secrecy across our communities, to be restored.

The Foundation would provide or coordinate educational materials, counselling support, grants of money to re-establish personal foundations to build on, mentoring support for relationships or employment, and research to further understanding. In doing so, it would liaise with other community agencies and services.

When it has spoken with its money in this way, churches would then have a more honest basis on which to speak about its regret and why it is doing this, and for its speaking to be taken more seriously than what it is now. It would need only one national or regional church to take the initiative to start the movement.

For fifty years, WACC has been enunciating, promoting and working with this understanding of what genuine Christian communication should be: building and shaping community, promoting freedom for all people, affirming justice and challenging injustice, demanding accountability and building connectedness.

It is that practice of communication that has been most liberating for victims of abuse, embodied practically for them in survivors' networks, sexual assault centres and investigative journalism. They also provide a roadmap to churches on how to respond to this crisis. Why do churches continue to place greater importance on the advice of their legal, financial, crisis management and public relations advisers than on the fundamental principles of their own ethos? ■

Peter Horsfield retired as Professor of Communication at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, in 2016. He holds undergraduate degrees in Arts and Divinity from University of Queensland and a PhD from Boston University. His research and publications have focused on various aspects of the interaction of media and religion, including religious television, theology, virtual reality and contemporary and historical perspectives on the place of media in the development of Christianity. He was one of the early critics and researchers on sexual abuse by clergy in Australian churches. He is the author of *From Jesus to the Internet: A History of Christianity and Media* (2015).