Christian public relations strategies and "The Last Temptation of Christ": A case study

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CHRISTIAN PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES
AND "THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST":
A CASE STUDY

A Project Presented
to the Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Interdisciplinary Studies

By
Donald Gene Beehler
March 1990
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to develop a public relations plan to improve communication among Christian groups and to help promote mutual understanding between the evangelical Christian community and the secular news media.

The project is divided into three parts: examination of the history of the public relations problem, my personal experience in dealing with international news media during the controversy surrounding the release of the film "The Last Temptation of Christ," and development and implementation of a plan of action.

I begin this study as an objective observer and reporter of events. My role shifts to that of an active participant in the second part, and a participant/observer in the planning and implementation process in the third part. While my participation inevitably places certain limitations on the study in terms of being a neutral observer, every effort has been made to maintain objectivity in the examination and interpretation of events.

The study also examines various communication theories and attempts to relate principles of these theories to the planning process. A five-step process is used in the development of the public relations strategy: sensing the problem, defining the problem, deriving solutions, implementing them and evaluating outcomes (Newsom 81).

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INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

The concept for a public relations strategy to help promote understanding of Judeo-Christian values, and the Christian faith in particular, originated from an event which brought the organization I work for, Campus Crusade for Christ, to the forefront of an international media controversy. The experience, along with the Christian scandals of the past three years, graphically demonstrated to me that there exists an enormous gap of understanding between the evangelical Christian community and the secular news media.

The purpose of this paper is to review the historical circumstances in the late 1980's that demonstrated an urgent need for improved communication between various Christian groups, a centralized clearinghouse for dissemination of information to the public, and an overall public relations plan to improve relations between the Christian community and the secular news media.

I am not aware that any other plan or strategy similar to this has ever been attempted. My position as director of communications for Campus Crusade for Christ, which is one of the largest missions organizations of its kind in the world, provides me with a unique platform from which to launch this project. My six and a half years of experience with Campus Crusade has given me insight into some of the
problems that exist in religious organizations and has also enabled me to establish relationships with my counterparts at other major Christian organizations and denominations.

Although one of my major objectives is to improve relations with the secular media, my goal reaches beyond editors and reporters to those audiences who are impacted by what they hear and read in the media and, as a result, form impressions about Christianity.

There are four basic categories of audiences, which are referred to as linkages because of their close relationship with the organization: Enabling Linkages, defined as groups and publics that can set policies and goals, control assets, etc.; Normative Linkages, which are links between an organization and other groups that share common values and goals; Functional Linkages, which are audiences that directly relate in some way to the organization's work; and Diffused Linkages, which include individual members of the public who don't belong to a formal organization but share a common interest in a particular matter.

All of these various audiences are important to any organization. When negative images or perceptions are generated through the news media about an organization, its linkages can be adversely effected.

In the case of Campus Crusade for Christ, for example, Enabling Linkages include the IRS; Normative Linkages are
other Christian organizations and denominations; Functional Linkages include our employees, vendors, etc.; and Diffused Linkages, include those individuals with whom we may want to share the Christian message.

This project is the culmination of a year and a half's worth of research on the subject, as well as numerous conversations and meetings with others involved in communication and public relations activities for Christian organizations. Some of the recommendations of this project are already being implemented, and I am confident that they will help to meet most of the goals set forth in this paper.

Because of the confidentiality involved in these meetings, I do not feel at liberty to reveal the names of the people or organizations associated with this project. However, those involved in our meetings and network represent many of the major evangelical organizations as well as several of the largest denominations in the country. Collectively, their constituents number in the tens of millions. However, for reasons that will be apparent later in this paper, the group is not at this time seeking any publicity or media attention since it is felt that we can initially be more effective by keeping a low-profile.

Before proceeding into the background information, a note of clarification of terminology is in order. My experience has been that the secular news media tend to use
the term "fundamentalist" rather loosely and often inappropriately when describing religious issues or activities. Although evangelicals and fundamentalists both adhere to the basic tenants of the Christian faith, fundamentalists have a separatist mindset which causes them to distance themselves from any association with liberals and modernists, while evangelicals believe in applying Christianity to all areas of life. The group I worked with on this project are clearly evangelical, for most true fundamentalists would not associate themselves with such a diverse group.
CHAPTER ONE

Background

Evangelist Oral Roberts sparked an international media firestorm with his January 1987 announcement to a national television audience that God would "call him home" if he failed to raise eight million dollars for medical scholarships by March 31. Roberts, a Tulsa-based television evangelist who claimed to be raising money to help his medical missionaries at Oral Roberts University, captured headlines by implying that he would die if the money wasn't raised in that time period. His fund-raising letter, which began by saying that "This is a long letter but it involves extending my life . . ." was the beginning of a three-year period of acute embarrassment and adverse publicity for the Christian community.

Las Vegas bookies gave Roberts 3-to-2 odds to survive past the deadline, while Robert's son, Richard, urged television viewers to "Sow a seed on your Visa, your MasterCard." Bumper stickers began popping up in Tulsa saying "L.O.R.D." (Let Oral Roberts Die) and "Send Oral to Heaven in '87" (Aynesworth 24). The Rev. Jimmy Swaggart, then the most popular television evangelist, said that while he believes that God can and does speak to individuals, he didn't think that "God is a hit man" (24).

The "give-or I-die" campaign finally ended when Jerry
Collins, a dog track owner in Florida, donated the remaining $1.3 million shortly before the deadline. "I think he (Oral Roberts) needs psychiatric treatment," Collins said, "He needs to relax . . . and get back on the main street" (Marshall 2A). Many Christians perceived the episode to be a kind of spiritual blackmail and were relieved when the matter was no longer a news item. As it turned out, the quiet was only the calm before the storm, and the worse was yet to come.

**PTL Scandal**

In March of that same year, Jim Bakker, a pentecostal preacher based in Charlotte, N.C., resigned as head of the PTL ministry in the wake of a sex and money scandal involving a former church secretary. Although ministers falling into sin has been explored in novels such as *The Scarlet Letter* and *Elmer Gantry*, as well as TV movies, what followed was something which even Hollywood would have been hard-pressed to have invented.

Appearing on his network to explain why he was leaving PTL, Bakker accused another unnamed evangelist of a "diabolical plot" to take over his ministry, including the Heritage USA theme park. Bakker's attorney, Norman Roy Grutman, accused rival televangelist Jimmy Swaggart of masterminding a bid to take over PTL (Schwartz 1A). Swaggart responded by calling Bakker a "cancer on the body
of Christ," saying, "I don't appreciate preachers that get mixed up in adultery and every other type of sin that one can imagine, and then blaming Jimmy Swaggart for it" (ABC News).

Televangelist Side-Show

For his part, Roberts sided with Bakker and used his television program to attack Swaggart:

"... I say to you, dear brother, who is sowing discord among the brethren, because somehow you think you're holier than thou, somehow Satan has put something in your heart that you're better than anybody else" (ABC News).

Swaggart, in turn, decided to talk about Roberts:

"We've got a dear brother in Tulsa, Oklahoma, perched up in a tower telling people that if they don't send him money, God's going to kill him. Then we got this soap opera that's being carried out live down in South Carolina, all under the name of God ..." (ABC News).

The Reverend Jerry Falwell, best known for helping to mobilize the Christian community on political issues, temporarily took over the ailing PTL at Bakker's request. However, as Falwell tried to set the PTL house in order amid almost daily revelations of financial misdeeds and extravagant lifestyles among the former leadership at PTL, Bakker accused Falwell of trying to "steal" PTL (Kelley 6A). Months later Falwell and his management team gave up in their attempt to clean up PTL and resigned, leaving the nearly $130 million PTL resort and television network in a
state of limbo.

The following year, starring in his own drama, a shaken, tearful Swaggart confessed an unspecified sin with a New Orleans prostitute and was eventually tossed out of his denomination, the Assemblies of God, for refusing to step down from the pulpit for a year and get counseling.

Robertson Runs for President

Meanwhile, television evangelist Pat Robertson was running for president of the United States. During his campaign, Robertson claimed that Soviet missiles are still in Cuba and that his Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) knew for a brief period where the former U.S. hostages in Iran were located. Both claims were repudiated by the White House. Robertson also charged that Planned Parenthood was plotting a "master race" and suggested that a Year of Jubilee be held every 50 years to forgive all debts. Predictably, Robertson lost the presidential race along with a great deal of his credibility.

The scandals, as well as some bickering among rival evangelists, combined with "shoot-from-hip" statements which more often than not appeared to be unsubstantiated, resulted in a crisis in confidence of the wisdom and integrity of some of the individuals perceived by the public to represent the Christian community.
Public Skepticism of Ministries

Christianity Today, a leading evangelical magazine, reported that, "Most religious broadcasters are no longer asking the question of whether they've been hurt by scandals within their industry, but of how much" (Frame 33).

As a result, previously ignored ministries and fundraising practices suddenly came under intense scrutiny by the media and, as the problems compounded, the public became increasingly skeptical of religious institutions in general. Many people tended to lump all Christian organizations together, resulting in contributions dropping in a number of ministries, particularly those known as "televangelists."

To illustrate how dramatic the fallout was, the February 3, 1989, edition of Christianity Today reported that 7,306,000 households watched the top 5 television ministries in 1984. In early 1989 that number had dropped to 4,262,000, representing a 42 percent decline (Frame 33).

Televangelist Robert Schuller, who in 1988 had the largest market share of viewers, had never resorted to desperate financial appeals. Yet, Schuller told his television audience toward the end of 1988 that his ministry had suffered its "most crushing financial blows," adding, "Today you must do something or we will die" (32).

Larry Jones, president of the "Feed the Children" television ministry, believes the decline in contributions
to his program "is an example of guilt by association" (33). "From what we've seen, a lot of people have simply quit giving to TV ministries," he said, adding that "It's a culmination of a lot of events, with PTL and Swaggart heading the list. A lot of people are wondering who we really are" (33).

Some religious leaders such as Billy Graham, a worldwide symbol of evangelism who has been a model of integrity throughout his lifetime, were not personally affected by the scandals. Others, who are less well known to the public but have loyal constituencies and do not depend on money from crisis appeals, such as televangelists D. James Kennedy of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church and Lester Sumrall of "Today with Lester Sumrall," were likewise relatively unscathed (33).

Evangelism Efforts Hindered Worldwide

However, regardless of who was effected financially and who was not, it was clear the cause of Christ had been damaged throughout the world. One Yugoslav minister told a Manila conference of 4,200 evangelical leaders from 191 countries that "efforts to spread their faith have been hindered by the 'scandalous behavior' of American television preachers" (Associated Press 10A).

Indeed, a Gannett News Service story in January 1990 put the decade in perspective:
"In 1980, the fortunes of television evangelists were at a peak. Liberals were nervous. Some 4.5 million viewers were tuning in to Oral Roberts, an all-time high. Business was booming at Jim Bakker's Christian theme park, Heritage USA. The Moral Majority, formed from the TV pulpit of Jerry Falwell to awaken an army of Religious Right voters, took credit for a dozen congressional liberal defeats on Election Day 1980.

"By 1989, the world of TV evangelism had been remade and humbled by visitations from those twin horsemen from hell, scandal and financial crisis. Roberts was an aging, over-mortgaged laughingstock. Jimmy Swaggart prayed people would forget his encounters with a prostitute. Bakker was serving a 45-year prison sentence. Even the Moral Majority had been dismantled, though Falwell did call that a sign of health, not despair" (Waddle D6).

As distressing as the scandals were to Christians everywhere, they did not have an adverse financial impact on Campus Crusade for Christ. In fact, donations to the ministry actually increased slightly during this period, perhaps because some people who previously donated to some of the other ministries were redesignating their gifts.
CHAPTER TWO

"The Last Temptation of Christ"

During the past 39 years, our organization has maintained a strict policy of non-involvement in political matters. For the most part, it has tried to avoid the limelight and not taken stands on controversial issues. The leadership believes that such issues may be divisive and detract from our primary goal, which is to present the Christian message throughout the world.

Although these negative perceptions of Christianity were naturally of concern to me, I did not feel any particular need to modify the way we were dealing with the media. For many years Campus Crusade has been successful in developing one-on-one and small group relationships with people who are interested in the Christian message and who want to learn more about the Christian life. We normally did not have many dealings with the secular media, and I saw no reason for us to change our course. However, the calm of our normal day-to-day ministry was shattered by a series of events which led us into the center of an international media controversy.

In the spring of 1988, our organization was contacted by Mr. Tim Penland, a Christian marketing consultant who had been hired by Universal Pictures to serve as a liaison to the Christian community for an upcoming film which was
believed to be an extremely controversial religious movie.

Penland suggested that Universal deflect some of the heat they were already getting from concerned citizens by holding advanced screenings of the film for a select group of evangelical leaders in order to get their reaction to it. Tom Pollock, president of Universal Pictures, agreed and shortly thereafter I was contacted to see if Campus Crusade for Christ President Bill Bright would like to participate in a screening "far in advance of the release of the film" in order to give his "counsel and input" to Universal officials. The name of the film, we learned, was "The Last Temptation of Christ."

Pros and Cons of Attending a Screening

It seemed that the screening of such a potentially controversial film was a risky venture. The author of the book the movie was based on had reportedly been excommunicated from the Greek Orthodox Church because the book had been considered by many church leaders to be "blasphemous." If the film was offensive, what was our next step? We were well aware that Universal could be using these Christian leaders to buy time and to attempt to capitalize on the controversy, resulting in greater profits at the box office. There was also the added element of uncertainty that these men, representing a large and diverse evangelical community, might be divided in their assessment of the movie.
On the other hand, if they refused Universal's invitation to attend a screening, the leaders would likely be viewed as narrow-minded "fundamentalists" who were so unreasonable that they wouldn't even look at the film before it was released. After all, Universal had already sent a letter to thousands of concerned individuals quoting the producer, Martin Scorsese, as saying that he had made a film that "will serve as a reaffirmation of faith to members of the Christian community" (Rabey 43).

In addition, the Christian marketing consultant Universal had obtained as a liaison to the religious community, Tim Penland, had been given assurances by Universal President Tom Pollock that Universal Pictures in no way wanted to make a motion picture that would defame Jesus Christ or be offensive to Christians. From a public relations standpoint, we were at a tremendous disadvantage right from the start since there was potential danger in whatever course of action we decided to take.

Despite the potential pitfalls, Bright and the other Christian leaders decided it was an important opportunity and agreed to attend the screening. A date of June 10 was set, and much of the Christian community held back their protests until they had a chance to hear what these leaders thought of the film.
A Developing Crisis

In early June, things began to unravel when Universal informed Penland that the movie was not yet ready for viewing. When he asked when it would be available, he was told perhaps late July or even August. When Penland asked that Universal delay the release of the film commensurate with the delay of the screening, he was told that the company could never do that for "some religious groups" such as the ones Universal had invited to the screening.

Since the film was slated for a fall release, it began to appear that Universal was in fact using these Christian leaders in order to buy time in heading off protests and efforts to keep the film from being released. That same week, copies of a pirated early script of "The Last Temptation of Christ" began to circulate to religious leaders. The ripple that was created in the indefinite postponement of the screening was about to become a tidal wave as the contents of the script became known.

While all this was going on, a small article which appeared in the June 4 edition of the Philadelphia Enquirer made its way to Penland. It said:

"Martin Scorsese clearly anticipates trouble when he releases his newest film, 'The Last Temptation of Christ' in the fall. In the spring, he signed on a Christian marketing expert to shepherd the movie past possible objections of religionists. Now comes word that he has scheduled a series of secret New York screenings..." (Enquirer N. pag.).
Universal Liaison Resigns

Feeling that Universal officials had broken trust with him about their true intentions in hiring him, and because of their refusal to show him the incomplete version of the film while at the same time scheduling secret screenings in New York, Penland resigned on June 12. Summing up his feelings over the experience, he told a reporter, "Just when I thought the bridge was about complete, I saw a Mack truck coming over it right at me!"

During the second week of June, our organization received an early copy of "The Last Temptation of Christ" script. I read the entire script on the evening of June 15, and the following day received a phone call from a reporter at Associated Press who learned that I had obtained a copy. Her article accurately quoted me as saying that, "The whole script, from beginning to end, denigrates the life of Jesus" (Farah N. pag.).

The next day I was contacted by the religion editor of the Los Angeles Times, who had read the wire service story and was doing his own article on the film. His story, which also quoted my concerns about the script's portrayal of Jesus, was published in the Times on Saturday. On Sunday I received a phone call at home from a radio station in Australia. The caller told me that I was quoted on the second front page of the Melbourne Times and asked if I
would do a ten-minute live interview on a radio talk program that had an estimated audience of three million. I agreed to do the interview, realizing that the word was out and the story was rapidly making its way to other parts of the world.

Universal continued to pursue a second screening with the original five Christian leaders. However, after reviewing the script, the group felt they had been exploited and declined to attend any future screening that their former representative, Mr. Penland, would not host.

In response, Universal released a statement saying that it had not reneged on its promise and that a special advance screening would be scheduled within seven days of the studio's receipt of the film. The statement added that Universal had "gone out of its way" to accommodate the concerns of the religious community (Dart Part II-1). The channels of communication had been severed, and it was clear we were on a collision course with one of the largest movie studios in the world.

Communication Strategy

By this time, Tim Penland and I were on the phone with each other several times a day. We, along with the leaders who had originally agreed to attend the screening, felt an obligation to somehow communicate the situation and our concerns to the Christian community at large. While the
film had been big news in the Los Angeles area, bits and pieces of the story were reaching other parts of the country and world, and it was clear that most people were not getting completely accurate reports, resulting in confusion over the reasons these leaders were objecting to the movie's release.

We considered several options, including a live satellite broadcast on Christian television and radio, an interview on psychologist James Dobson's radio program "Focus on the Family" (which is aired on more than a thousand stations), and a full-scale news conference involving local and national media.

The one factor that bothered all of us, however, was that none of us had actually seen the film. The only tangible evidence we had of its content came from two early scripts. What if Universal had intentionally leaked the scripts in order to hype the movie through the controversy that was sure to follow? It was also possible, though not likely that the finished version of the film would be entirely different than the book or script. We were all uncomfortable with these unknowns, and in my interviews I tried to make it clear that my concerns were based on the script.

A major breakthrough came in late June when Penland received a phone call from an individual close to one of the
top executives at Universal Pictures. It turned out that
Universal had already screened the film for their dis-
tribution people, even though they said they weren't able to
show it to Penland or the Christian leaders. According to
the Universal executive, the film was even worse than the
script in its portrayal of Jesus Christ. The executive was
so upset after viewing the movie that he refused to be as-
associated with it.

Not only did we now have a reliable source who had
actually viewed the film, which confirmed our worst fears
about the script, but we also had proof that Universal had
deceived us and was apparently trying to time the release of
the film to coincide with the peak of the controversy.
After a conference call with the original group, it was
decided that the best and most timely course of action was
to hold a news conference.

**Christian Leaders Speak Out**

The date was set for July 12, the same date as the
scheduled screening in New York. Time was short, and we
knew that anything we had to say after the screening (if it
did in fact take place) would be old news. Besides, we felt
it would be a good way to steal some of Universal's thunder
by having a news conference a few hours before their
carefully selected religious leaders viewed the screening.

Undoubtedly, this would generate extensive publicity
for Universal, but the story was already out and the leaders felt they could no longer remain silent. Their involvement had delayed protests over the film for months, and they felt an obligation to publically voice their concerns. Even if speaking out meant more profits for Universal, they felt they had a moral and ethical responsibility to take a public stand.

Several days earlier, Larry Poland (who served as an advisor to Penland) teamed with Penland and radio psychologist James Dobson (one of the original Christian leaders who had agreed to attend the screening) to discuss the movie in a taped interview on Dobson's "Focus on the Family" program. During the program, the men described the contents of the film (based on the scripts and the report of the Universal executive who view it), the history of their working relationship with Universal, and the determination of Universal to release the film (Poland 65-66). The interview was aired nationwide on July 11, the day before the news conference, setting the stage for a major media event.

**News Conference**

More than a hundred people attended the news conference, packing the room at The Registry Hotel in Century City. Now Penland and Poland, along with three of the original members who had been invited to the screening, (Bill Bright; the Reverend Jack Hayford of the Church on the
Way; and the Reverend Lloyd Ogilvie, of Hollywood Presbyterian Church), were going before the secular and religious media to tell their side of the story. A prepared statement outlining the history of the project, our objections to the film, and an appeal to Universal to cancel its release was also made available to the media.

Near the end of the news conference, an associate took me aside and told me that we were meeting in the same room where, less than a year ago, Pope John Paul II appealed to leaders in the media and entertainment industry for compassion and understanding in presenting Christian values. The meeting had been chaired by none other than Mr. Lew Wasserman, chairman of MCA, which owned Universal Pictures. A note was quickly passed to Poland, the moderator, and he ended the conference by saying,

"It was the dream of seeing bridges built between the Christian community and Hollywood that led us into a relationship with Universal. That dream was proclaimed to leaders of the media in this very room less than a year ago by Pope John Paul II (Poland 87).

"On that occasion Lew Wasserman presided...it is in that spirit, the spirit of Lew Wasserman, the spirit of the Pope...that we call this meeting today. May God work (this) out to the best of all of us" (Broeske Part VI-9).

The media loved the tie-in and a number of them included it in their stories, even though we were totally unaware of the connection at the time we booked the hotel.

The news conference, which was attended by a number of
major media including CNN, *Time*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, *Entertainment Tonight*, AP, and UPI, was a great success and received extensive coverage. From our perspective the reports were fair, largely, we believe, because we had met the media head on and had answered all questions honestly and straightforwardly. Our vote for the quote of the week was the lead in a front page story in *Daily Variety*, a Hollywood trade publication: "If the wrath of God does not fall on Universal Studios, the wrath of God's well organized, media savvy armies will" (Dawes 1).

Universal, on the other hand, had been stonewalling the media for weeks and was being inundated by calls and letters. In fact, one reliable source inside Universal told us that on one day shortly after the news conference they receive 122,000 letters (Poland 91).

Message Gets Diluted as it Travels Across the Nation

The waters began to get deep for us again, however, as the story circulated to other parts of the country. After the initial coverage, much of the Eastern media ignored the background that had been reported meticulously by the *Los Angeles Times* and other West Coast media. A complex story began to be simplified through the national media to essentially one sentence: "A group of 'fundamentalists' in Southern California are trying to censor a film they haven't seen" (Poland 107).
Much of the Eastern media ignored the fact that Universal had originally invited these leaders to preview the film for their input. Rather than presenting the leaders' concerns about a matter that was deeply personal and meaningful to them, many of the news stories defended Universal's right to portray Jesus Christ as a degenerate.

Instead of providing balanced reporting on our plea to Universal to withdraw the film out of respect for the religious beliefs of hundreds of millions of Christians throughout the world, censorship became the dominant issue. Yet, by definition, censorship involves governmental, ecclesiastical, or institutional prior restraint. We, as individuals, did not fit any of those categories; rather, we were simply making an appeal to Universal to cancel the film's release. However, little or no consideration was given to the fact that as citizens we have the First Amendment right to protest and express our views publically.

"Assault" on the Christian Community

Former White House communications director Patrick Buchanan, now a syndicated columnist, described the double standard many journalists employed in their coverage of the controversy in an article at the height of the turmoil:

"We live in an age where the ridicule of blacks is forbidden, where anti-Semitism is punishable by political death, but where Christian-bashing is a popular indoor sport; and films mocking Jesus
Christ are considered avant-garde... With 'The Last Temptation of Christ,' Hollywood is assaulting the Christian community in a way it would never assault the black community, the Jewish community or the gay community... Even sight unseen, the movie represents an act of cinematic vandalism against the beliefs that Christians hold sacred.

"'Sensitivity' is supposed to have become the mark of the man of decency in modern American life... A 'sensitive' man does not repeat ethnic jokes; he does not abide insults to any minority; he monitors his rhetoric, lest he inadvertently give offense... Christians, however, America's unfashionable majority, may be mocked; their preachers may be parodied in books and on film; their faith may be portrayed as superstitious folly. And secular society, invoking the First Amendment, will rush to the defense of the defamers, not the defamed" (Buchanan A-9).

While Buchanan clearly captured the essence of our concerns, there appeared to be a wide gap of understanding and effective communication between us and much of the secular media.

Film Divides Religious Community

Another dilemma we faced was the fact that some of the very liberal theologians who attended the July 12 screening actually liked the film. Some news reports, for example, described the liberal theologians as "moderates," causing credibility problems for religious leaders who opposed the film. The media generally ignored the widely differing religious views these individuals held from those of mainstream Christianity, and a debate over the true nature of Jesus Christ began to divide the religious community.
Meanwhile, Universal President Tom Pollock granted an exclusive interview to the Los Angeles Times. In the interview he made it clear that it was Martin Scorsese, not Universal, that was responsible for its religious content, and that it was Scorsese's failure to have the film ready on time that caused Universal to miss the screening for the conservative Christian leaders (Broeske 1,6). We interpreted this statement as an attempt by Universal to distance itself from the controversy.

**Buyout Proposal**

In one last effort to try to communicate their concerns to the leadership at Universal, Bright and several other Christian leaders tried to arrange for a private meeting with Lew Wasserman. As chairman of MCA, (Universal's parent company) he had the authority to stop the film's release. The evangelical leaders wanted to discuss a proposal with him whereby Bright would head a fund-raising effort to reimburse Universal for the expenses they had invested in the movie in exchange for canceling its release.

They believed that Christians around the world would contribute to this effort in order to prevent the release of a film which they felt would give many people a very distorted and inaccurate view of Jesus Christ. A more subtle dimension of the offer was that it was a model of the core teaching of the Christian faith -- one person offering...
to pay for the offenses of another. The meeting was not an attempt to interfere with the company's right to produce such films, or a movie goer's right to see movies of this nature. Rather, it was an appeal to Wasserman's sense of decency and respect for other people's religious beliefs.

When Wasserman refused to meet with the group, Bright sent a letter to him (which was also released to the Los Angeles Times to make sure that Universal did not continue to ignore us) in which he presented his proposal. I knew that such an proposal would immediately thrust us into the center of the controversy. However, by going public, it would "smoke out" Universal officials from their "no comment" posture and force them to address the issue publically.

It also gave Universal executives an opportunity to make a dramatic public relations gesture by saying that because the film was obviously so offensive to so many people, even to the point that several individuals had offered to raise money to reimburse their expenses in exchange for cancelling its release, they would on their own withdraw the film. Such a move would have made them instant heros with many segments of the religious community. On the other hand, many in the film industry, as well as other liberal clergy, would no doubt decry Universal's "caving in" to "fundamentalists demands."
A Lost Opportunity

As I thought through the implications of such a proposal, I realized that the public relations battle over "The Last Temptation of Christ" would probably not be won through facts or logic. Rather, people would be much more likely to respond to a sincere appeal from the heart, much the same as if someone were trying to defend their mother from a vicious verbal attack.

In all the years I have been involved in Christian work, I have never seen anyone who could better express their love for Jesus Christ than Bill Bright. During the news conference, he scored big points by simply and honestly sharing what Jesus means to him and how Christ changed his life. Bright's question, "How could anyone do this to the most wonderful man who ever walked the face of the earth?" and his statement that he had "many sleepless nights after reading the script," had been widely quoted and hit individuals at an emotional level. If he continued with that approach, I could see him winning over millions of people in national interviews.

Throughout this process and during the days just prior to the release of the offer, I attempted to make it clear to our leadership that Universal would very likely try to use the offer against us either by calling a news conference
with leaders in the entertainment industry condemning this attempt to "censor" a film or else respond in full-page adds. As expected, the full-page adds appeared a few days later with Universal officials rejecting the proposal, saying they were defending their "fundamental freedoms of religion and expression" (Universal Part I-27). What followed was best summarized in a July 31 article in the San Bernardino Sun:

"Whenever the telephone rings, Don Beehler faces temptation. Though his job as public relations director for Campus Crusade for Christ International requires he answer the incessantly ringing contraption, he may have a strong desire to avoid touching it. It will probably be another call about the controversial movie 'The Last Temptation of Christ.'

"Because his boss, Campus Crusade President Bill Bright, is hip-deep in a fight against the film, Beehler finds himself caught up in a media firestorm. It swirls around charges that "Last Temptation" is blasphemous and portrays a sex-driven Jesus who waffled in fulfilling his prophetic responsibilities.

"'The phone never stopped ringing for a few days. It was overwhelming. I still must have 100 telephone calls here that I haven't returned yet,' he said this week, pointing to a desk papered with pink call-back slips" (Cooper El).

Leadership Fails to Respond to Challenge

Although I expected such a response by the media, I had not anticipated the reaction by some of our executives who had previously not expressed a great deal of interest or concern about the controversy. Suddenly the reality of full-page ads addressed to Bill Bright appearing in the New
York Times, the Los Angeles Times, the Washington Post and the Atlanta Journal-Constitution hit home. At the very time when I felt we needed to be taking the offensive and responding to Universal's letter, our leadership became divided over what to do.

Days went by and now, when we had the attention of the national media, we didn't have anything to say. Instead of seizing the opportunity to respond with interviews and full-page ads telling our side of the story, explaining why the film was offensive and using the opportunity to discuss the biblical Jesus, I could only tell the media that we had no immediate comment. After nearly two weeks of indecision, we issued a one-page statement that, for the most part, was lost in the media shuffle. The news value had long since passed, and a golden opportunity was lost forever.

Although the opportunity for our organization to respond was gone, others were addressing the issues raised in print and broadcast interviews throughout the nation.

Massive Protests Surround Film's Release

The protests culminated with 25,000 people descending on Universal the day before the film was released (Chandler Part I-1). According to police reports, exit ramps had to be closed two hours before the rally began and many thousands of additional protestors were turned away. Traffic was paralyzed for miles and for a time a major portion of
Los Angeles was virtually shut down. A wide variety of the religious spectrum attended the rally, including those of the Jewish and Muslim faith, who objected to anyone's religious beliefs being distorted and maligned on celluloid. The film had obviously touched a nerve, and thousands responded by taking a stand for the sanctity of all religions.

Box Office Flop

On August 12, 1989, "The Last Temptation of Christ" was released in a handful of theaters nationwide. Although newscasts and publications showed long lines the first couple of weeks, interest soon waned and the film became a box office flop. At last report from a Universal insider, the company had a net loss of more than $14 million.

Citizen magazine, a publication of the Focus on the Family ministry, described the film's box office decline,

"When it ['The Last Temptation of Christ'] was first released, Universal promoters were hailing the film as a major success because it averaged $46,000 per screen during the first week, but a week later it had dropped to $26,000. By the third week it was grossing only $11,000 per theater.

"Ron Forman, a publicist with AMC theaters, a chain that decided to run the film, said the movie did as well as it was going to during the first three days of release and has been in decline since. 'Those who really wanted to see the film probably did so during that first weekend,' he said" (York 1-2).

Interestingly, I have talked with several people who
were under the impression that Universal had actually made money on the film because of the controversy.

**Analysis of the Protests**

Were the protests successful or did they simply generate interest in an "art" film which otherwise would have remained obscure? That question may well be debated for years to come. It is doubtful, however, that any stockholder of MCA would be pleased with a loss in excess of $14 million. If the film was in fact helped by the protests, the best Universal officials could say is that it would have lost even more money if they hadn't stirred up millions of people throughout the world.

In retrospect, one of the most effective things that happened was the tremendous grassroots effort that took place in communities across America. Our organization received numerous reports of how concerned citizens were successful in getting many local theaters to agree to not show the film out of respect for the religious beliefs of the Christians in their communities. After all, the film would come and go, but the owners had to live and operate their theaters in those communities for years to come.

Another interesting twist to the controversy is the way many Christians made lemonade out of the lemon. Suddenly Jesus Christ was a major topic of conversation, and it gave them a unique opportunity to share the biblical Jesus with
scores of people. For example, Campus Crusade for Christ published a brochure titled "Who Is This Jesus?" About 20,000 copies were distributed and we are still getting orders for additional brochures to this day.

From the beginning, we were at a distinct disadvantage in that Universal officials held most of the cards. They controlled the film and the release date, making it a race against the clock for us. We lost valuable time in organizing an effective protest while waiting for the screening to materialize, but I don't see how we could have done otherwise under the circumstances.
CHAPTER THREE

Development of a Public Relations Plan

Looking back, I think one place where we could have improved our communication efforts would have been through having a better coordinated effort among our normative links. Many of our associates in other parts of the country were unaware of the details of the film and the history of our relationship with Universal Pictures. Better communication among these groups from the beginning would have resulted in more informed and articulate spokespersons for our side and may also have given us an opportunity to hold news conferences in other parts of the country, such as Chicago and New York City, in order to more fully explain the background and concerns Christians had as well as to answer the questions raised about the censorship issue.

Better coordination among Christian groups would have also improved the information flow because there were many rumors swirling about and it was sometimes difficult for people to know where to go for accurate information. Finally, it was clear to me that we need to find a way to improve our communication through the secular media, and ultimately our various audiences reached through the media, if we want our message to be clearly understood in the future. These considerations made me realize that there was a need to achieve better coordination among Christian
organizations and denominations on issues of mutual concern.

**Related Theories of Communication**

When examining these issues from a theoretical perspective, it is clear, based on the feedback we received from the news media, that our some of our key messages were either not being properly understood or were being ignored.

Traditional communication models, such as those of Shannon, which focuses on the transmitter/receiver process of communication, as well as potential sources of interference through noise; Berlo, which is concerned with factors such as attitudes and culture that effect how people filter a message; and Lasswell, which emphasizes the channels of communication, explain how various factors can affect the communication process, resulting in interference or distortion of the message (Williams 24-29).

Likewise, some of the assumptions that may have been made by the sender and the receiver of the messages may have been influenced by underlying assumptions or stereotypes. Professors Anthony G. Athos and John H. Gabarro, of the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, discuss the dynamics beliefs, values, and attitudes have in understanding the point of view of another:

"Each of us engages and sees the world in ways that are similar to those of others and in ways that are different . . . models [of reality] develop as a result of an accumulation of past experiences . . . [and] can be considered assumptive frameworks. They are related clusters of
assumptions that are based on past perceptions, which then become, to some extent or other, 'updated' by new perceptions and experiences" (Athos 144).

The Image

Another useful model relating to how we conceptualize the world is Kenneth Boulding's "Image." According to Boulding, the image is a product of our subjective knowledge based on our perception. The most important factor in how we view an image of something is our value system (Boulding 12). Boulding believes there are no true facts since everything is determined by our perception and is filtered through our personal grid of values and experiences (14). Since the image is shaped by the response of the receiver, a person can best be persuaded to change his mind by changing his image of someone or something.

I believe one of the barriers to effective communication in this instance was erroneous assumptions on the part of members of the evangelical community and the secular new media, resulting in the formation of negative images which in turn affected attitudes.

Christians vs. the Secular Media

Many of the events of the past three years presented earlier in this paper formed an image or "model of reality" of Christian leaders that resulted in certain assumptions about their character and their credibility. Likewise, I
have often heard complains from various Christians leaders, in private and in public, about the evils of the liberal media, resulting in a siege mentality on the part of some individuals.

Although it is perhaps an extreme example, the following article from the Detroit Free Press expresses some of the sentiments and attitudes I believe exist in the secular media toward so-called "fundamentalist" Christians and have contributed to the previously described situation:

"They're back. The know-nothings have found a new cause. They always do. This time, they're raising a ruckus over 'The Last Temptation of Christ' . . . I'm puzzled. How is it some of these people who call themselves fundamentalist Christians can spew such fundamentally un-Christian hatred? . . . Anti-intellectual, anti-freedom of speech, anti-Semitic, you name it and there are some know-nothings who practice it. They looked for Red under every bed with Joe McCarthy. They cheered police dogs in Selma . . . And now the know-nothing wacky pack has latched onto Martin Scorsese and 'The Last Temptation of Christ.' Freedom of choice? They prefer to trample the very notion" (Duffy N. pag.).

Another example comes from an editorial in the Orange County Register which refers to the "Last Temptation" protesters as "a bunch of holier-than-thou twits."

"Let's suppose the movie does portray Christ as a sex-starved lout, as some of Those Who Know Better charge. Let's suppose the movie does mock Jesus . . . So what? After all, one man's blasphemy is another man's piety, and the Constitution protects it all" (Emmers N. pag.).

Although these authors represent a fringe segment of journalists, the lack of comprehension and stereotyping
reflected in their articles represents the core of the public relations problem this study is attempting to address: how to solve the perceptual problems of evangelical Christianity that have developed in recent years.

Charlie Shepard, the investigative reporter for the *Charlotte Observer* who uncovered the PTL scandal, acknowledged the ignorance many reporters have about religion in general in a recent interview:

"... because of the pace of our work and the fact that we're shoveling stories into the newspaper every day, we too often don't have the context and the background to make our reporting intelligent and sensitive...

"I realized I needed to understand this community of people and then I set out to understand the distinction between pentecostalism and the charismatic movement, for example, or a fundamentalist ... Unfortunately the press too often has either too little time or little patience or little mental energy for that kind of research and that's one of the things we need to do a better job of in the press" (Ross).

**A Public Relations Approach**

Having observed the growing skepticism of Christian organizations in general, and then personally experiencing the frustration of dealing with media who, for the most part, did not, from my perspective, adequately understand or fairly present our concerns in "The Last Temptation of Christ," episode, I began to consider how to approach the problem through the use of traditional public relations
technique. My initial goal was simply to find a way of increasing mutual understanding among the some of the Christian leadership and some of the leadership of the major secular media. The first step, it seemed, was to better organize communications among some of the key evangelical groups.

It was in that frame of thinking that I approached a meeting in September 1988 with a number of the groups involved in the protest of "The Last Temptation of Christ" in Nashville, Tennessee. The purpose of the gathering was to discuss mutual concerns about the film and consider a response to it on behalf of the constituencies represented at the meeting. I met several people from ministries similar to Campus Crusade and began to realize the potential such a gathering could have in terms of representing large numbers of people and speaking with one voice on issues of mutual concern.

**Holding Universal/MCA Accountable**

From that meeting a decision was made to encourage our constituents to boycott Universal's soon to be released "ET" video. The boycott campaign also targeted Universal films, Universal Studios tours, Cineplex-Odeon theaters, and all business interests of MCA, Universal's parent company. In this case, however, it was too little too late as there was insufficient time to organize an effective boycott and
communicate to our various audiences.

Although the boycott was generally considered a failure, the protests apparently made a profound impact on Universal Pictures. A Universal employee who attended a recent briefing on the subject by Universal Pictures said that the speaker made it clear that they had gotten far more than they bargained for and described it as the worst experience the company had ever had. Significantly, the speaker also indicated that Universal would never again get involved in distributing a movie of this nature.

A United Front

Clearly the boycott had other objectives than promoting understanding of Judeo-Christian values. However, the meeting helped me to realize that diverse groups could organize themselves into one unit when necessary. Thus I became convinced that the concept of presenting a united front was sound and, with proper organization and planning, could have enormous potential in the future. Such organization could serve as the framework for a larger public relations effort designed to meet my original goal of improving communication among normative groups and improving relations with the media.

Project Concept

In January 1989, I met individually with several key people from major Christian organizations at the National
Religious Broadcaster's (NRB) Convention in Washington, D.C. I had spent several months mulling over possible approaches to putting together an on-going coalition that could not only mobilize for a given cause, but could also effectively communicate to the Christian community through secular and religious media.

As I mentioned earlier in this paper, one of the major challenges we faced in "The Last Temptation of Christ" episode was the lack of responsible and articulate speakers who could appear on programs to present the Christian perspective. The perception was that these individuals represented the leadership of the protests and could not be taken seriously. Hence, the issues themselves did not appear to merit serious consideration.

While the Motion Picture Association had its president, Jack Valenti, as a primary spokesman to defend the film, the Christians were often represented by just about anyone the media could grab off the street, including outrageous fanatics, such as the Reverend R.L. Hymers, who became famous for his public slashing of screens, supposedly symbolic of what would happen in theaters all over the world.

Although his congregation is relatively small, one would have thought he was next in line to succeed Billy Graham with all the media coverage he received. Many people
had the image of his scowling face and ranting rhetoric etched in their minds. For many he came to represent the heart and soul of the protests even though there were numerous credible, responsible Christians who were also deeply hurt and offended by the film.

For example, the Southern Baptist Convention has a membership of 15 million people from 38,000 churches; the National Association of Evangelicals has a membership of 14 million people from about 200 organizations and denominations; and James Dobson, whose Focus on the Family radio program is carried on more than a thousand stations, all were publically opposed to the release of the film. Collectively, these and many other groups which joined in the protests represented tens of millions of people. Yet, R.L. Hymers and others like him dominated the media throughout much of the protests.

Formation of a "Clearinghouse"

From these informal conversations in Washington, a meeting was organized in Chicago in May 1989. Although it turned out that the project underwent an evolutionary process, my original plan was to discuss the formation of a "Christian Clearinghouse" that would serve the Christian community as follows:

1. Research topics of concern to Christians and make recommendations for appropriate action.
2. Disseminate information through a communications network so that ministries will have accurate and up-to-date information on specific issues.

3. Develop a Speaker's Bureau whose members could then serve as official representatives for much of mainline Christianity.

4. Develop a key group of Christians in the secular media who could serve as a resource by providing counsel on how to deal with the media on specific issues.

Through these steps I envisioned a formal coalition that would communicate with each other on a regular basis and actually serve as an entity that could coordinate meetings between Christian leaders and leaders in the secular news media in an attempt to gain understanding of each others perspective and, in the process, hopefully change attitudes on both sides.

Another objective was the formation of a centralized clearinghouse where the media could obtain accurate and timely information from the evangelical community in terms of reaction to certain issues or events, rationalization for our position, etc. The clearinghouse could also be a source for receiving and disseminating information to Christian groups, improving the flow of information and communication to these groups.
Implementation

Although the meeting was kept small by design in order to be able to operate efficiently, it soon became apparent that there were widely divergent views on how to organize such an entity, if in fact it was advisable to do so. The main problem seemed to be how to create some sense of unity and cooperation out of groups with different goals and approaches to various issues. Some of the participants were very cause-orientated, while others felt that involvement in a controversial issue that could distract them from proclaiming the gospel would be unwise. Some wanted to discuss action points for specific issues, others wanted to focus on ways that we could be more effective in dealing with the media and how we could better utilize traditional public relations techniques.

There was also a great deal of skepticism that such a coalition could even agree on a common course of action on a particular issue. One participant observed that the groups represented (even though they were small in number) had differing philosophies and styles of dealing with the media. How would it be possible to take such diverse groups, especially if we expanded the coalition, and do something concrete?
In response to this concern, I presented the group with March 23, 1989, article in USA Today that described how the presidents of 49 U.S. women's organizations "have banded together to seek new laws to help women, children, and families" (Johnson, N. pag.). Although these groups were very diversified, they found a way to unite on issues of mutual concern and boasted 10 million members "in every state and congressional district" (N. pag.).

Principles of collective behavior, as those employed by the women's groups, have been applied in social movements throughout history. It seemed reasonable that if these groups could work together, giving them a much stronger voice collectively than they would have individually, then surely Christian groups could also find a way to unite on issues of mutual concern.

The core problem, however, seemed to be the concern that these groups may get committed or lend their name to a coalition that might someday take action which their organization could not support. This became such a great concern that it threatened to unravel the coalition before it could even get off the ground.

Although we still had a ways to go in achieving unity, the following seemed to summarize the consensus of the meeting:
1. One of the organizations present was appointed to serve as an information clearinghouse for the coalition. No announcement will be made about a "new" coalition; we will simply begin to carry out the desired functions. (The organization chosen to carry out this function has a large and diverse constituency and has a sufficient infrastructure to carry out the initial process of coordinating information with its present staff, which is about 25 people.)

2. Interested organizations will "sign up" to be a part of the coalition.

3. The coalition will not set any agenda. It will serve to coordinate efforts when there is agreement on an issue.

4. The coalition will serve to present and explain different points of view when there is not agreement on an issue.

Expanding the Coalition

A second meeting was scheduled for December 1989. The main objective of this gathering was to begin to expand the coalition and to fine-tune its goals and purpose. We also parted with a mandate to talk with our respective leadership and see if they would support such a network or coalition while stressing that it would not limit or restrict its
members in terms of their response to controversial issues. Rather, it seeks to help mobilize the Christian community so that it can be more effective and organized when there is agreement on a particular issue. We also stressed that it would provide a central place where people could go to get accurate and up-to-date information.

During our discussions, it also became clear that there would be two branches of the coalition: although both would provide exchange of information, one branch would be issue-oriented; the other would deal specifically with media relations. I was asked to chair a task force to examine the public relations aspect of the coalition in terms of dealing with the media.

As I spoke with the other two members of the task force in the weeks that followed, we attempted to identify practical ways to carry this out as well as to decide who else should be invited to be a part of the public relations effort. We discussed the possibility of inviting Christians who work in the secular media to a workshop which would enable us examine a few recent events "post-mortem" to see what worked well and what could have been done differently. Some of the principles would surface, I believed, through these types of discussions and would help make us more effective with the media in the future.
Christian Public Relations Fellowship

Although the possibility of an advisory committee was discussed, we concluded that it may be more effective to have informal contact rather than a formal group where competition and egos could get in the way and create additional problems, particularly if a piece of advice by the advisory group was not heeded.

We also discussed ways in which we could network and share information among ourselves so that we could benefit from the experience of others. Several years ago such a group did exist and met each year at the National Religious Broadcaster's Convention. The group was called the Christian Public Relations Fellowship and met annually to hear speakers as well as to network with other Christian public relations professionals, much the same as the Public Relations Society of America functions. Although the group was no longer in existence, we considered the possibility trying to reconvene the Fellowship rather than attempting to reinvent the wheel by creating a new entity. One member of the task force thought this group should be composed of people who spend at least half of their time in public relations since some who attended the Chicago meeting also had other responsibilities.

Media Advisors

During the summer I met with an individual who has
served as a consultant to our ministry on matters concerning the media. As a former editorial page editor for one of the leading newspapers in the country, he was well-qualified to provide guidance and counsel on the public relations aspect of the coalition since he was on a first-name basis with many of the key leaders in the media. He was intrigued by the concept.

We discussed the possibility of putting together a workshop of Christians who work in the secular media for members of the public relations branch of the coalition. This panel would have an opportunity to share their perspective on how evangelicals are perceived by the media, as well as provide suggestions on what we could do in a positive way to clarify those perceptions.

Such a workshop would also give the panelists an opportunity to candidly assess what Christian public relations practitioners are doing right and wrong, as well as helping us understand what their supervisors and peers think and how we can more effectively communicate with them. In other words, if we want to educate the media on a particular issue, what is the best way to do it?

In an August conference call with the other members of the task force, however, it became clear that they did not think we were far enough along in the process or had our goals clearly enough focused to put together such a workshop
in the next few months. There was consensus that such a workshop could be valuable in the future, however, particularly in terms of having the panel address the group on the relevance of religion in the news as well as helping us to increase our "batting average" by defining what constitutes news to them and their associates.

Taking the Next Step

In October, a conference call was arranged among those who participated in the May meeting to see if we should continue to pursue the December meeting in Chicago. Although there was still hesitancy among some of the participants about the coalition, everyone agreed that another meeting was in order. Once again there was a need to emphasize that no one was coming to the meeting with a commitment to buy into anything; rather, our objective was to sharpen our focus, learn from group discussions on particular issues, and develop regular, effective communication between us.

In some cases there may be opportunities when everyone would agree on a particular matter, and we would then begin the process of putting together a strategy on how to identify the key point and have a focused, united response. In summary, everyone was in agreement with the concept of having a forum to bring these groups together to discuss issues of mutual concern, different approaches and, if there
is consensus on a particular issue, explore ways in which we can work together effectively.

**Evangelical Information Exchange**

The December meeting was held in Chicago and seemed to be a breakthrough in terms of defining our goals and establishing a mechanism through which we could accomplish them. The idea of a coalition was abandoned in favor of an information exchange through which we could give and receive accurate and timely information. We decided to call this entity the Evangelical Information Exchange (EIE). We identified six guiding principles as a basis from which to evaluate potential action on issues:

1. Retention of religious liberty.
2. Recognition of God in public life.
3. Protection of human life as sacred.
4. Preservation of traditional family.
5. Provision of justice for all.

We defined the purpose of the Exchange as follows:

1. To exchange information for the purpose of informing and educating organizations and their audiences about various issues of concern to the Christian community.
2. To isolate key issues in a timely manner.
3. To understand the principles for evaluation of issues.
4. To discuss appropriate response to issues, as well as formulation of responses to the media when applicable.

5. To identify suitable spokespersons for presentation of the evangelical view.

A discussion of some of the upcoming issues in 1990 the group thought would be important to the Christian community followed, and each participant gave an update on their particular organization's activities. They also provided information on issues in which they were involved. The meeting was a tremendous educational process and helped us not only to be aware of certain issues, but also to be better educated about what they mean and potential consequences. In turn, each representative is now better equipped to pass this information along to their supervisors, peers, and respective audiences.

**Budget**

Recognizing that there will be some initial start-up costs to the Evangelical Information Exchange, we established a budget for the first year of $1,200. Since there were a dozen organizations represented (almost doubling the size of the group at the first meeting) we agreed to each pay $100 for annual membership in the Exchange. This will cover printing costs, postage, faxes, telephone calls, and meeting rooms. Other costs, such as
airfare, meals, and motel accommodations, will be paid for by the individual groups.

**Improved Communication**

There was a great deal of enthusiasm over the potential of the Exchange. Participants realized that they were not getting locked into a new organization, but were instead subscribing to a service that will provide timely information of interest to the Christian community and will also provide a vehicle through which important information can be disseminated to a wide and diverse audience.

They also understood that through such a structure they will be able to establish opportunities to interact with one another and, on occasion, come together to discuss issues of concern to the evangelical community. Participation in this forum did not necessarily imply agreement on particular issues or strategies. However, when there is consensus on an issue, the group could discuss formulating a common response. Likewise, if a common course of action is agreed upon, the group can disseminate information and recommendations to their respective audiences nationwide.

The public relations branch of the EIE will be separate and will focus on promoting training and professionalism in the practice of public relations. Members will also be available to provide input and counsel in formulating a public response on a particular issue.
One of the participants mentioned that before his organization makes a public response, it consults with a man who was a former news reporter. Although the consultant does not have any authority to override a decision, he often provides useful insights into how the message will be perceived by the media and public, along with suggestions on how to modify it. This same advisory concept will apply to the public relations branch of the EIE.

Reconvening the Fellowship

In January, the public relations task force obtained a copy of the names and addresses of those previously involved in the Christian Public Relations Fellowship. Letters of invitation to an informal meeting in February 1990 at NRB were sent to those names on the list. The purpose of the meeting was to see if there was a desire to reconvene the Fellowship and to discuss the direction we would like to see it take.

About 25 people attended our January 30, 1990, gathering of former Christian Public Relations Fellowship members. I opened the meeting by expressing my desire to develop a network among ourselves in order to share information and experiences in working with the media. One participant described the group's purpose in three F's: fellowship, fraternity, and a forum for public relations seminars.
A lengthy discussion followed, and the group decided to begin to renew the Fellowship by hosting public relations seminars at next year's NRB. In the past, the Fellowship hosted speakers from major media. Although specific topics are still being evaluated, many were in favor of a return to those types of speakers, as well as others who have been through unique experiences with the media.

Present plans call for the group's original statement of purpose to be retained. The statement indicates that the Christian Public Relations Fellowship exists:

1. To provide opportunities for fellowship with other Christian public relations specialists.
2. To share information and benefit from the experience of others.
3. To promote professionalism and Christian ethics in public relations efforts.
4. To provide professional training.
5. To cooperate in public relations efforts that are of general benefit to the evangelical Christian community.

An Informal Approach

Although the previous Fellowship had a president and officers, we are initially taking a less formal approach. The previous Fellowship president was also the spokeswoman for the Assemblies of God, and she was, of course, inundated
with media inquiries when the Bakker and Swaggart scandals broke since both men were members of that denomination. The vice president was in the midst of a job change, and the Fellowship simply fell through the cracks as a result.

In order to avoid this in the future, we are attempting to divide tasks among several people so that the burden will not be too great on any individual. Membership dues were $15 a year and covered expenses such as informational brochures, stationary, and other printing costs. At this time, we plan to keep the dues at the same amount for 1990.

Although one of my original objectives was to have a more formalized group that would pursue meetings with leadership in the secular media, it appears that such an effort will not happen in the near future. However, once the Christian Public Relations Fellowship is reorganized, I believe there may be potential for that group to organize such meetings.

One of my remaining objectives is to develop a true clearinghouse for the media. The need for such an entity is demonstrated by a phone call an associate of mine received about a year ago from a reporter at the Los Angeles Times inquiring about a certain issue. When my associate was unable to help the reporter, she asked if there was any type of clearinghouse where she could get information from a qualified spokesperson. The Exchange is also designed to
help meet that need, although to date most of our time has been spent on internal communication among ourselves.

It is, of course, necessary for us to fine-tune the information exchange aspect of the EIE before we can structure it to disseminate information to the public. We also need to discuss development of a speaker's bureau, as well as the formation of a media advisory committee consisting of Christian who work in the secular media.
CONCLUSION

Although much work needs to be done, I believe that the Evangelical Information Exchange will enable much of the Christian community to improve information flow and networking among those of us working for a common cause. This will enable the community to meet one of my original objectives, that of improving communication between normative links.

It cannot, of course, (nor would it ever attempt to) provide credibility to those who have abused the public’s trust through immoral conduct or financial shenanigans. As Cutlip and Center observe in Effective Public Relations, "No amount of well-conceived communication can change a bad performance into a good one" (Center 14).

The Christian community at large does not excuse such behavior, nor do most Christians, I believe, think that those caught in wrong-doing should be exempt from facing the moral and legal consequences. However, the EIE can help the public to understand that the vast majority of Christian organizations are ethical and honest.

The EIE likewise cannot prevent some of the "loose cannons" from firing their shots over the airwaves. We also realize that while we cannot stop the media from focusing on people like R.L. Hymers, we can provide them with a list of credible representatives who can intelligently and
articulately present the evangelical perspective on a given issue.

By providing opportunities for dialogue between members of the Christian Public Relations Fellowship and the secular media, I believe that another objective, that of removing false assumptions and stereotypes on the part of both parties about each other, will be accomplished over time.

Whether or not the Exchange and the Christian Public Relations Fellowship will be successful in promoting understanding of Judeo-Christian values remains to be seen. However, I believe that the foundation has been laid to accomplish the goals we have set and, in the process, those involved will be more effective communicators of the Christian message of God's love and forgiveness through Jesus Christ.
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