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## Make the media work for you

Pastor, I don't know what to do," the mother sobbed over the phone. "Tony's school said they absolutely could not transfer him." Alice had spilled the story to me with increasing emotion. Her son, Tony, no small kid, was getting chased home from high school by gang members. This was no small threat in our ghetto neighborhood. Any of these altercations could end up with Tony being shot. His mom's inquiry about a transfer had been shut down.

I was 25 years old, the relatively new pastor of Armitage Baptist, and pretty much out of my league when it came to dealing with the major societal ills of America's inner cities. The police could not help because a crime had not been committed. Kids got chased in our neighborhood all the time. The police were so overwhelmed with actual violence that the possible violence that could happen in a matter of minutes or seconds was not even on their radar.

Feeling a great weight of responsibility to help this mother and right a wrong, I called a columnist at the *Chicago Tribune* in desperation. I told him Tony's story. Within a couple days, Tony's story not only appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, but the syndicated column went across the nation. There was a flurry of activity, a call from Tony's school (which the column made look bad), a visit by three huge policemen to my tiny apartment (the column made the police look bad also). I received five to ten calls from across the country, mostly from Christian people offering to let Tony live with them and finish his schooling. Within hours, Tony had been transferred to a different, safer school. I learned the power of the media.

My passion has always been to evangelize my city. We believe in spreading the good news anywhere, any way, at any time possible. This incident taught me to view the media as a friend, a partner, as an available tool to get things done, a channel for information I wanted to get out, and not incidentally, a way to wield some clout.

Now, with hundreds of media interactions under our belt, Armitage may have logged more media time and space than any other church in Chicago in the last 100 years — from a handful of front-page stories in the *Chicago Tribune* and *Chicago Sun-Times* to numerous lead stories in the evening news and lesser stories and mentions innumerable.

I have discovered that, generally, the media is not any more or less hostile to Christians than any other entity in a godless society. They want to make money. They do it through news stories that grab and hold as many viewers, listeners, and readers as possible. They want to do their job with excellence with as little effort as possible. In other words, if I help them do their job, they really don't care what I believe or say.

We have seen God do remarkable things without a media budget and without a full-time media director. We have seen God take our prayers, our praise, our preaching, and even the ordinance of baptism and put it on the evening news. I think being wise as serpents includes using whatever means available to us to accomplish our end. While we have seen strong statements included in news stories, such as "Jesus is the way, the only way," and, "Jesus will meet the deepest needs of your life," the media is primarily a tool to communicate a more general

message that could be called pre-evangelistic. We could never afford the kind of time and space God has provided for us in terms of public relations. We have gained more notoriety and created more good will than we could have any other way. We have never compromised our message. We have addressed issues such as homosexuality, race, abortion, gang violence, and teen sex. Being in the media alerts the community to your presence. Being seen in the media, actively involved in issues that concern the community, communicates concern, relevance, and influence.

If we can have such success using the media in blue state, deep blue, big, Catholic Chicago, you can surely use the media where you are. Understand what the media wants. They are after human-interest stories, personal stories. They want local ties to regional, national, or international stories. They want pictures of action. They don't want a picture of three grandmothers standing around the piano in the church basement with potholders they are sending to missionaries.

You need to learn how to write a press release. Maintain a list of media outlets with phone, fax, and email information. You should have a media liaison to meet arriving media and assist them in their work.

Your city needs to know you exist. Your city needs to know you care. Your city needs to know you are involved in meeting universally recognized needs, like addictive behaviors, at-risk youth, singles issues, marriage health, families struck by tragedy, etc. You can use the media to help fulfill your mission to evangelize your city.