

PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Linking Church and

As priesthood leaders work with stake and district public affairs councils, they can all help strengthen their communities—and build up the kingdom of God on earth.



Community



By Philip M. Volmar

Church Magazines

When Carol Witt Christensen was called to serve as public affairs director for the Topeka Kansas Stake (USA), she felt “fearful and inadequate” about having to interact with news reporters and editors on behalf of stake leaders.

“The thought of making cold contacts with news people was a little terrifying,” she recalls. And though she majored in English in college, she says that she “didn’t know anything about writing news releases.”

Despite her self-doubt, Sister Christensen decided to rely on her testimony, her familiarity with her community, and the belief that her calling came from inspired priesthood leaders. She says she started with training from the Public Affairs Department and began to “learn [her] duty, and to act in the office in which [she was] appointed, in all diligence” (D&C 107:99).

She began poring over the weekly religion section of her local newspaper to determine what was considered newsworthy. She called the religion writer to find out about deadlines before submitting her first news release.

“I noticed the types of small news items that were printed and began paying special attention at church to activities, interesting people, and accomplishments that seemed appropriate to announce in our newspaper,” she remembers.

Over time, Sister Christensen learned that media relations is much more than merely pitching story ideas. It’s also about knowing the media and helping reporters do their job while at the same time helping them come to understand the Church.

After a series of successes, including an article about her stake’s seminary program appearing in the local paper, she says she gained confidence and “felt on fire with a desire to bring forth the Church ‘out of obscurity’” (see D&C 1:30). Now, years later, Sister Christensen still serves

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID STOKER

as her stake public affairs director and says “that fire has continued to blaze.”

“Much of what we seek to do in public affairs,” she explains, “shows that we love, believe in, and worship Jesus Christ; befriend, work with, and serve our brothers and sisters in the community; and warm people to the restored gospel and the Church.”

Priesthood leaders throughout the world are guiding and encouraging public affairs specialists and councils as they work alongside those in their areas to benefit their communities, correct misconceptions, and demonstrate that Church members follow Jesus Christ.

Though Sister Christensen’s initial efforts focused on media relations, there are many ways Church public affairs councils are following inspired priesthood direction while also helping build their communities and the kingdom of God.

Community and Government Relations

Just 65 miles (105 km) from Topeka, in the Lenexa Kansas Stake, President Bruce F. Friday, stake president, and Sister Carol Deshler, stake public affairs director, are working together to build positive relationships with influential members of their community. They want to help them recognize Latter-day Saints as “good neighbors, a positive influence in the community, and followers of Jesus Christ,” says President Friday.

Sister Deshler, who works with the stake presidency and other members of the stake’s public affairs council, seeks opportunities to partner with other faith-based groups and community organizations to better serve the citizens of their area.

“Nearly all of our successes working with

community groups have been a result of one-on-one relationships,” Sister Deshler says. For instance, a member of another church and a member of her stake ate lunch together and discussed ways the two groups could come together to do something positive for the community. The conversation led to six people—three from each church—forming a “Better Together” committee to brainstorm ideas for the partnership.

That partnership led to a benefit concert in 2010 in which choirs from several churches participated. Admission was a bag of groceries, which benefited a local food pantry. Some 700 people from the community attended the event, which was held in the newly completed stake center. A reception was organized so community and religious leaders could mingle prior to the concert.

Following the concert, four additional churches, two members of the city council, and the chief of police asked to be represented on the Better Together committee, which now meets monthly. The concert was repeated again in 2011, that time with another church hosting, a total of seven churches participating, and approximately 1,000 community members attending.

“The feeling of goodwill and unity as followers of Jesus Christ came through in a significant way among the churches,” Sister Deshler says. Those feelings were evident later when President Friday was in an airport more than 1,000 miles (1,600 km) from home. A woman he had never met approached him and said she recognized him from the Better Together benefit concerts, which she had participated in and found remarkable.

She told him, “I have never felt such a feeling of love for others in our community as



For two years the Lenexa Kansas Stake in the United States has partnered with other area churches to hold a benefit concert. The admission cost—a bag of groceries—was donated to a local food pantry. In 2011, approximately 1,000 community members attended, including several church and government officials.



I have through these events. Thank you for cosponsoring these concerts. I belong to another congregation, but we have the deepest respect and admiration for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”

“That,” says President Priday, “is what public affairs is all about. As we’ve broadened our circle and expanded our vision, we’ve developed many special friends throughout the community. We have mutual respect for each others’ beliefs and a genuine love for one another.”

Garnering such cooperation and respect from community leaders has proven effective in Eastern Europe as well. Katia Serdyuk, director of media relations for the Ukraine public affairs council, works with public affairs missionaries and local priesthood leaders to improve relationships between the Church and the community. “Many people have misconceptions and misinformation about the Church,” says Sister Serdyuk. “As public affairs specialists working with priesthood leaders, we strive to change those perceptions by working with opinion leaders, the media, and the general public. Successful public affairs efforts generate an atmosphere in which people of influence can help the Church achieve its purposes while we help them reach their goals too.”

In Zhytomyr, Ukraine, members of the Church participated in a reception hosted by the city mayor, Olexander Mikolayovich Bochkovskiy, to recognize the Church’s humanitarian project that provided much-needed equipment to seven schools throughout the city. Also noted was the community service efforts of Church members in the city’s Gagarin Park, conducted in April and October 2011. Zhytomyr Branch president Alexander Davydov represented the Church and acknowledged the city’s appreciation.

Event Planning

In addition to media and community relations, another public affairs opportunity comes from planning and hosting events, say Daniel and Rebecca Mehr, who recently completed a public affairs mission in the Caribbean Area.

“Enlisting members to educate their friends through



A MESSAGE TO PRIESTHOOD LEADERS

“We encourage stake and district presidents and Area Seventies everywhere to ensure that stake and multistake public affairs councils are called and trained.

In some districts and developing areas of the Church, public affairs efforts may be small at first and implemented without a fully organized council. Your area director of public affairs can arrange training and point you to important resources.

“You will discover how public affairs work can be a wonderful tool for achieving priesthood objectives as you build relationships and partner with community leaders, the news media, and other opinion leaders. Your attention to this work will also enhance the reputation of the Church by helping people understand that we follow Jesus Christ.”

Elder L. Tom Perry of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Chairman of the Public Affairs Committee

common-ground activities, like a cultural event, a dinner, a service project, or other activities, could be especially effective for building relationships,” says Sister Mehr.

However, Brother Mehr cautions that one of the biggest mistakes public affairs specialists can make is to “start planning activities without considering community needs and without counseling with priesthood leaders.”

Elder and Sister Mehr believe that an annual plan that reflects stake and ward priesthood leaders’ direction is one way to help guide event planning from the outset. To build such an annual plan, Sister Mehr recommends coordinating events using a four-step planning process that focuses on a strategic outcome and is tied to community needs and local priesthood objectives:

- What are the greatest needs in our community?
- What issues in our area affect the progress of the Church, positively or negatively?
- Who are leaders in the community with whom we can partner to address needs and resolve issues?
- How can we initiate or continue a relationship with these leaders?

With these questions answered, priesthood leaders and public affairs councils can avoid creating “activities for activities’ sake,” Sister Mehr says. Instead the councils can plan and carry out events that can build trust between community and priesthood leaders. These events also give Church members and community members a chance to interact and build friendships.

In the Dominican Republic in 2010, for example, priesthood leaders, public affairs councils, and community members worked together at an event highlighting Mormon Helping Hands efforts. Brother and Sister Mehr invited several of the nation’s dignitaries with whom they had been working.

“Many prominent individuals representing many institutions and organizations attended,” Brother Mehr recalls, adding that the Church’s Area Presidency also came.

“The event was very successful,” he reports. “More and more, we experienced mayors and city organizations requesting our help in some kind of cleanup. In addition, there was good exposure for the Church to many organizations.”

While involving priesthood direction is crucial to successful event planning, it’s not the only consideration to make. Kathy Marler serves on a multistake public affairs council in San Diego, California, USA. One of her friends of another faith said that Latter-day Saints are good at inviting others to Church-sponsored activities but often fail to collaborate with others in other churches’ events.

Sister Marler recalls her friend saying, “You just ask others to come along. It would be wonderful if you would ask us if we need help. The answer would be a resounding yes.”

By identifying others’ needs, says Sister

Marler, public affairs councils can sometimes help a community more than they might in hosting the events themselves.

Crisis Communication and Management

Even though most public affairs work takes place in the everyday situations of community life, it can also poise a stake, country, or Church area to deal with emergencies, as happened last year in Japan.

Elder Gary E. Stevenson of the Seventy, President of the Asia North Area, remembers how the 2011 earthquake changed the media climate overnight. “The earthquake and tsunami focused the eyes of the world and all of Japan on the devastated northeastern coastline,” he recalls.

Elder Stevenson says that the catastrophe created an “intense level of interest” in the humanitarian aid and volunteer activities offered to Japan, including those given by the Church.

Within days of the tsunami, the Church began providing necessities to disaster-stricken members and nonmembers alike. “Domestic and international media began following every storyline,” says Elder Stevenson.

With the Church providing more than 250 tons of humanitarian aid supplies and enlisting the help of over 24,000 volunteers who gave over 180,000 hours of service, the relief efforts often caught the attention of local municipal leaders, Elder Stevenson recounts. In a country where less than two percent of the population identifies itself as Christian, some of those leaders wanted to know more about the Church’s role in the efforts. That curiosity, he says, provided an opportunity for public affairs specialists not only to help those in desperate need but also to bridge



Following the 2011 earthquake in Japan, priesthood leaders worked with public affairs specialists to mobilize relief efforts via the Mormon Helping Hands program. Of these humanitarian efforts, one reporter wrote: “The only thing that rivals the Mormon church’s ability to spread the word is its ability to cope with emergencies.”



understanding at the same time. For example, the week after the tsunami hit Japan, one reporter wrote: “The only thing that rivals the Mormon church’s ability to spread the word is its ability to cope with emergencies. . . . The church is not just focused on its own flock.”¹

This positive coverage was possible because of years of building relationships. Conan and Cindy Grames, who began serving as public affairs representatives for the Asia North Area in August 2010, say that “the public affairs council in Japan had worked for years with key government leaders around the country. These friendships opened the doors to the local agencies, which were then willing to accept our help.” Elder Yasuo Niiyama, serving with his wife as director of the Japan public affairs council of the Church, points out that “even Japan’s national government leaders came to understand how effective the Church is and how quickly we could move forward to provide relief.”

An instance when Japanese leaders appreciated the Church’s timely assistance was when local priesthood leaders identified an overwhelmed refugee shelter set up at a school in an isolated area. Together with the public affairs council and the local Church welfare manager, the priesthood leaders arranged for food and other relief supplies to be delivered to the shelter, which was housing approximately 270 displaced tsunami victims.

Although those at the shelter were initially surprised to receive assistance from a Christian church, the second time Mormon Helping Hands volunteers came, wearing their yellow vests, one child yelled, “Here they come! I wonder what they brought this time!”

After receiving the donations, the shelter coordinator told Elder and Sister Grames,

“Your church brought us the first meat and fresh vegetables we had after the earthquake.”

“It felt good,” says Sister Grames, “to really be a helping hand not only to the shelter but also to the priesthood leaders who were trying so hard to reach those in need.”

Elder Niiyama explains another positive result of the council’s efforts: “We found that sharing information about the Church’s relief work with members as well as outside opinion leaders was very vital to our public affairs objectives. I feel people outside of the Church now have a better image of the Church and members are more confident in the strength of the Church in Japan.”

Public Affairs as a Tool for Local Priesthood Leadership

As a crucial part of a worldwide organization, priesthood leaders can benefit from public affairs councils that know the local environment and are able to help serve community needs. Sister Serdyuk, in Ukraine, states, “It is rewarding to see how well priesthood leaders have embraced public affairs as a tool in achieving their priesthood objectives. One such example is performing community service through our Mormon Helping Hands efforts, which has developed unity among members of branches and wards and has also helped build a closer relationship between the Church and local communities.” ■

The Church’s public affairs website—available in English at publicaffairs.lds.org—offers additional helpful information.

NOTE

1. Kari Huus, “In Japan, the Mormon Network Gathers the Flock,” World Blog from NBC News, Mar. 18, 2011, http://worldblog.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2011/03/18/6292170-in-japan-the-mormon-network-gathers-the-flock.

PROPHETIC DIRECTION RELATING TO PUBLIC AFFAIRS

The following talks can help priesthood leaders, public affairs councils, and other members better understand how public affairs helps strengthen communities and fulfill priesthood objectives.

- L. Tom Perry, “Perfect Love Casteth Out Fear,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2011, 41–44.
- M. Russell Ballard, “The Importance of a Name,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2011, 79–82.
- M. Russell Ballard, “Faith, Family, Facts, and Fruits,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2007, 25–27.
- Gordon B. Hinckley, “What Are People Asking about Us?” *Ensign*, Nov. 1998, 70–72.
- Ezra Taft Benson, “May the Kingdom of God Go Forth,” *Ensign*, May 1978, 32–35.