

## **The Media: Help or Hindrance for Christian Faith Formation?**

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There can be no doubt that Planet Earth is now a media-saturated planet. The combined impact of the print media (newspapers and magazines), radio, and the increasingly-pervasive electronic media (TV, the ‘video’ range – VCR, DVD and VCD – and the Internet) is to link the western world already virtually totally, and other parts of the world increasingly, into one large global village. The media is clearly a significant component in what has been dubbed the “McDonaldisation” of culture, in which it is much more difficult for peoples to define themselves as discrete entities in the ways they have traditionally done so, by geography, ethnicity, history, and language.

Is this good news or bad news? Positively, the media can be – and is – used to good effect, such as when it raises awareness and increases alertness to what is happening in the world, or when it provides entertainment. But its potentially negative impact is also perceived in its ability to distort reality, to create consumer demand, to put ideas into people’s minds;<sup>1</sup> and to allow ready access to material which would otherwise be more difficult to peruse (e.g. sources of pornography and violence).

A key question, then, for Christians is, “*Is the media a help or a hindrance for Christian faith formation?*” A realistic appraisal of this question is critical for those who give leadership and direction for the nurturing and discipling of people – regardless of age: children, youth or adults – in Christian faith communities (whether expressed as local churches, small groups, or families). To seek to answer the question there needs to be understanding of both the nature of how Christian faith is formed and features of the media, and then an analysis of how the two areas may be effectively related to each other. Note that in this paper, primary reference is to the electronic media.

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<sup>1</sup> An example: On March 7, 15 year old Charles Williams was arrested for allegedly killing two people and wounding 13 others in a California school. Within two days eight new cases were reported in other schools throughout USA. A clear example of “copy-cat behaviour”?

## Christian faith formation

There is a wide variety of meanings given to “faith”, but it may be described succinctly in both a broad and more specific way:

1. At a very broad and general level, faith has to do with *making meaning* – thinking, valuing, feeling, and making sense of the patterns and connections discovered within the world and within persons. In this respect it is often considered to be a verb rather than as a noun: something a person *does*, rather than something a person *has*. Everyone has some sort of commitment of this nature; that is, everyone believes in something or someone. The *content* of faith perceived in this way is what, and/or who, a person values, holds dear, commits themselves to, reveres, serves, or aligns themselves to.<sup>2</sup>
2. Within a Christian religious context, however, “faith” has a more precise quality to it. For the Christian believer, “faith” contains the understanding of allegiance to the God revealed in the Bible, especially through Jesus Christ, so that “it is faith which is the essential basis of belonging to the people of God... [it is] a distinctive characteristic of the true people of God”<sup>3</sup>

Faith conceived in this way has a number of constitutive elements which are essential for Christian faith:

- a. ***faith as believing*** – a belief conviction, usually cognitive;
- b. ***faith as imagining*** – the ability to imagine what lies behind the abstract concepts of theology/life;
- c. ***faith as trusting*** – the relational component of Christian faith, strongly affective; and
- d. ***faith as doing*** – the lived, practical expression of the other elements.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This is the sense in which James Fowler uses the term in his classic text *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*, Blackburn (Victoria: Collins Dove, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> R. T. France, in J. B. Green, S. McKnight, & I. H. Marshall (Eds.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 224.

<sup>4</sup> Three of these elements are described by T. H. Groome, *Christian religious education: Sharing our story and vision*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1980, pp. 57ff. The addition of “imagination” has been suggested by F. Bridger, *Children finding faith: Exploring a child’s response to God (2<sup>nd</sup> edition)*, Bletchley (UK: Scripture Union, 2000), pp. 47ff.

Faith, as an integration of these elements, will be both life-transforming and have an enduring impact on the person.<sup>5</sup> While at any time one of these components may be more dominant than the others, all are required for effective Christian growth. Clearly, faith expressed in this way is a process, rather than static, and in which the growth is both *dimensional* (the holistic “heart-soul-mind-strength” areas of the “first and great commandment” – Mark 12:30), and *directional* (towards God and towards people, as in the two commandments – Mark 12:29-31).

Two further important features of faith development need to be recognised also:<sup>6</sup>

1. Everybody has faith potential, regardless of age. At every age or passage of life people are capable of being faithful, achieving their faith potential. The quality of faith may change as people age, but it may still have its key and basic features. This also means that younger people may be more “faith-full” than their elders: indeed, children have inherent qualities which enable a person to have a greater openness to, and understanding of, God, and often adults have lost these. Examples of such qualities are a natural sensitivity to the world and to nature, leading to wonder and astonishment; belief which is “easy and uncomplicated”; accepting things and people at face value; and an open, welcoming nature, resulting in a confident trust in life.

2. The development of faith is promoted by various agents. These include:

- A person’s experiences of life;
- The communities in which people live, and which enculturate them with particular values;
- A person’s knowledge (doctrine);
- A person’s active thinking and reflecting upon experiences, and conceptualising them into their worldview;
- How people interact with the divine (God); and
- A person’s relationship with, and perception of, those who task is to prompt growth.

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<sup>5</sup> E. C. Roehlkepartain, *The teaching church: Moving Christian education to center stage* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), pp. 34-35.

<sup>6</sup> Adapted from *Making disciples: Following Jesus in Australian society* (Victoria, Aust.: Scripture Union), undated.

Appreciation of the qualitative features of Christian faith outlined in this section will lead perceptive readers to realise that faith does not form in any sort of “spiritual vacuum”, but is impacted upon by the common events of a person’s life. Thus if the media is a significant component of someone’s life, it will have a significant influence on that person’s Christian faith formation. What sort of influence will that be?

### **What the media does well**

An analysis of the media reveals a number of functions at which it is particularly adept, and which need to be recognised when its impact on Christian faith formation is critiqued.

#### **1. *The media conditions people to image rather than to print.***

The media presents data in a way which conditions people to sense more by pictures rather than words, and to prefer to absorb information by seeing rather than by hearing. And people respond to image more by the use of their affect (“feelings”, emotions) than their cognitive faculties. Note that this (as with some of the features which follow) is not casting a value judgement, and saying that this is necessarily right nor wrong; but rather recognising that it is a difference to be aware of.

#### **2. *The media encourages passive rather than active participation.***

The electronic media does not encourage interaction: it is primarily a spectator activity, in which any real critical analysis is discouraged. Thus constant and long-time exposure to this bombardment of visual images results in people losing their ability to be discerning. This perspective is reflected in Ian McDougall’s comment:

What does TV offer (for children) other than peace and quiet for their parents? It provides a totally artificial experience with which children cannot interact except by pushing a button and switching to another equally artificial experience. It presents a world in which value judgement is impossible since everything and everybody in it are dished up in exactly the same shape and size, adding yet more isolated images to the child’s mental store of unprocessed information.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The source of this quotation cannot be readily traced.

3. ***The media packages what is of value in “30 second soundbites of infotainment”.***

Because it needs to attract and keep attention, the media has learnt to entertain as it informs, with constant and regular change of imagery needed to keep peoples’ attention. Thus the quality as well as acceptable quantity of what can be absorbed by people’s minds is a major factor which the media bears in mind, regardless of the issue of concern; and so it is little wonder that this mentality is carried by people over into their expectations of, for example, education, politics and social comment, and even worship.

4. ***The media defines reality and truth.***

The media encourages people to affirm that “seeing is believing”. Having failed to develop their critical capability, many people allow their understanding of truth to be shaped as the media chooses to define it. Media critic Neil Postman states this succinctly: “Whether we are experiencing the world through the lens of speech or the printed word or the television camera, our media metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, colour it, argue a case for what the world is like.”<sup>8</sup> Along with this, the media is adroit at its ability to “normalise” the values of culture and behaviour, and these may be quite different to those of the past of a society, at both the individual and corporate levels.

5. ***The media effectively blurs the lines between reality and fantasy.***

This is related to the previous point. How does a person differentiate between, for example, real-life killings on the news with the “killings” in dramas, between violence on the streets of Jakarta with violence in a Jackie Chan movie? With constant media exposure, people’s minds – especially those of children or adolescents, do not intuitively ask that question. The media is a great leveller in this respect. Commentators are concerned often not so much for the quality of children’s programmes (as important as that is) but with the effect of the news and current affairs programs on children, for children’s distress is often

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<sup>8</sup> N. Postman , *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business* (London: Heinemann, 1985), p. 10.

reported where explicit real life violence on the news is adjacent to the fantasy violence of children's cartoons.

#### 6. *The media takes over socialisation.*

The major socialising role which historically was taken by family and peers has gradually been shifting to the mass media: "The shift... can be traced to the growing popularity of radio in the 1930's, followed by television in the 1950's, and the computer networks today."<sup>9</sup> A component of this take-over is the increasing inhibition of free choice. Once the option has been taken to turn on the electronic media, to use the remote control to select a particular channel or open a particular website, what is presented is largely determined by the media-providers. In the case of TV, most of the rationale for this selection is driven by commercial concerns rather than on social reasons.

#### 7. *The media defines society's role models.*

As part of its shaping of reality, the media is particularly adept at shaping the models it seeks to portray. Two extremes can be identified in this process: either the failings and faults of a person are over-emphasised; or they are presented without real failings, and their good points over-emphasised. The outcome may be cynicism, or misplaced admiration. Consider, as examples, how the media has portrayed people such as Bill Clinton, Lady Diana, Mother Teresa, tele-evangelists, and national politicians. Who is lampooned or caricatured, and in what ways? (Similarly, who is *not*?). The way the media projects its "heroes" seems to contrast with the biblical method, in which frailty and sin is juxtaposed with courage and faith (as seen, for example, in the accounts of Old Testament personalities like Abraham, Noah, and David). One is led therefore to ask why the contemporary media exposure of human weakness breeds cynicism and disillusionment, while biblical exposure of weakness cultivates hope. Incidentally, a challenge arises in the way in which Jesus is presented by Christians: does he come across to contemporary people as a role model worth following?

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<sup>9</sup> M. Griffiths, "Internet addiction: Fact or Fiction?" *The Psychologist*, vol. 12, no. 5, 1999.

## 8. *The media invades privacy.*

No area of the world or of personal life is out-of-bounds to the media, or likely to be unexposed. Another of Postman's comments is telling: "Television cannot keep secrets of any kind".<sup>10</sup> No section of society is protected from its prying eyes, and in the process of feeding their curiosity, people are in danger of losing something of the sanctity of life. A contemporary example of this is the upsurge in the number of "reality programmes" on TV – such as *Survivor* and *Temptation Island* – and the very large audiences such programmes command.

## 9. *The media deconscientizes and anaesthetises.*

Constant exposure to the barrage of vivid pictures and images over time reduces the horror of depravity and disaster. Can average American children be unaffected by the 8000 murders and 100,000 acts of violence seen on TV before they reach high school?<sup>11</sup> There is significant evidence of the long term impact on children's and adolescents' moral values as a result of exposure to pornographic material.<sup>12</sup> Or note the portrayal of particular forms of sexuality, either explicitly or by innuendo, which tend to be accepted as normal over a period of time. While the message source may be changed by the press of a button or remote control, that is a choice often not taken because what is being sensed has such strong appeal to a person's psycho-emotional makeup.

## 10. *The media breaks down the distinction between 'children' and 'adults'.*

Two interesting effects can be witnessed in the expansion of the electronic mass media: the creation of the 'adult-child' and of the 'child-adult'. Postman notes that "in the television age there are three (stages of life). At one end, infancy; at the other, senility. In between there is what we might call the adult-child." The 'age of childhood', marked by innocence, play and learning, has been shrunk to a very

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<sup>10</sup> The source of this quotation cannot be readily traced.

<sup>11</sup> From an article in *The Straits Times*, March 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Eg. G. Cupit, *'It frightens me': Researching children's violent media worlds*, Unpublished paper, Adelaide: deLissa Institute of Early Childhood and Family Studies, undated.

limited span, such that now from about mid-primary years – or even earlier – the young person watches the same TV programmes as adults, and are exposed to the same input, whether news coverage (often centred on the spectacular – war, violence, and human suffering), advertising (with its relentless consumerist manipulation), or entertainment (often reflecting society’s continuing preoccupation with sexual matters). This has not always been so: “In the Middle Ages there were no children because there existed no means for adults to know exclusive information. In the Age of Gutenberg, such a means developed. In the Age of Television, it is dissolved.”<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to the ‘adult-children’ are the ‘child-adults’, people who are chronologically older but who have been stunted in the realisation of their full human potential because of their addiction to, and lack of stimulation from, the media. So, increasingly, any significant community interaction is between a generation of ‘adult-children’ interacting with ‘child-adults’ – and the question that then arises is “what does this do for the effective identification and communication of desirable values?”

The values of the media expressed in these ten points need to be subjected to a Christian critique when consideration is given to the role of the media in the process of Christian faith formation. Of course, these points are generalisations, and exceptions may be found for most generalisations, not least when the range of the media is considered. However, the overall impact of these ten points, when considered systemically, is of a set of values which impact dramatically on the agents which promote effective faith development; and which, if unchecked, will be potentially virulent in offsetting the Christian values leaders are seeking to inculcate in those people they are responsible for nurturing.

### **The formation of values**

By now it becomes most apparent that the media does not come to us value-free! It is in fact a potent tool for communicating and redefining culture. Society’s values and ideals are conveyed by the media, but the media does not merely reflect the values already held by society or by individuals. There is no doubt that the media also reinforces and even advocates certain values – and the question to be asked is “are these the

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<sup>13</sup> From Postman. Source of this quotation cannot be readily traced.

same values we wish the people for whom we are responsible to be owning and living by?”

There are different forms by which the actual values held by individuals or a community can be identified.<sup>14</sup> They may be *explicit* values (a person is aware of them, and can state them) or *implicit* (revealed by one's behaviour; they are often not stated, and a person may not even be aware of them). Both of these forms are real. But values may also be *complicit*: they are neither stated nor enacted, but they are demonstrated by what it permitted in other people's behaviour, thereby given the values a degree of reputability. Complicit values may contradict both the implicit and explicit values (e.g. I may say I object to watching violent films, but I allow my child access to them).

Values, as essential ingredients in Christian faith development, are conveyed through the variety of agents referred to above. It is the extent to which there is an effective “ecology of agents and institutions”<sup>15</sup> working together in the promotion of common values in a person's life that will determine the effectiveness of any formational process. Where there is fragmentation and a clash of value systems, as in pluralistic environments where no one set of values may have official sanction, intentional intervention which is both qualitative and quantitative will be required if the adoption of one particular set of values (e.g. Christian values) is to be encouraged. It comes as no surprise that a question sometimes asked by leaders of ministry with children in churches is: “in one rushed hour of Sunday school a week, how can we effectively counter the impact made on the children of the competing values they are exposed to for the rest of the week?”<sup>16</sup> This is a crucial question, not just for children but for people of any age, given the amount of time they spend interacting – passively much of the time – with the media? In short, the answer most usually is “we

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<sup>14</sup> G. Cupit, *Caring for children in the media age: The development of values*, Unpublished paper, Adelaide: deLissa Institute of Early Childhood and Family Studies, undated.

<sup>15</sup> This is a phrase adapted from J. Westerhoff, who talks about “an educational ecology” of institutions working together for effective Christian faith formation. See J. Westerhoff, *Will our children have faith?* (Melbourne: Dove Communications, 1976), p. 13ff.

<sup>16</sup> An Australian report (source not readily traced) has shown that by the end of high school the average child has spent 11,500 hours in the school classroom and 15,000 hours in front of TV. The time a child has spent attending Sunday school for an hour a week, 50 weeks each year, from 3-17 years of age, would be 700 hours. It would be interesting to calculate equivalents for Singapore children.

can't!", if complicit values are much more dominant than the explicit or implicit ones.

### **A way forward**

When the perspectives above on the media, the features and agents of faith development and an understanding of values formation are put together, it becomes clear where the challenge comes to Christian leaders seeking to bring about an informed, life-transforming Christian faith in those for whom they are responsible.

The challenge will be met to the extent that a *viable alternative values-framework* is provided, one which will have a real impact on peoples' lives. Such a framework will not be effective by limited or partial intervention, but rather as people are encouraged to be in a situation in which there is greater focus and integration between the agents and institutions impacting on them. And this will result from active participation in dynamic counter-cultural communities. Such communities need not necessarily be defined by geographical proximity of the members (although this is important to give greater consideration to) but rather they key feature is the effectiveness the 'psycho-social relationships' between the members of those communities, where careful attention is paid to the interaction of the social influences with the physical and psychological components of persons as they move towards human maturity. Christian church communities are ideally situated, at least theoretically, to be able to take up this challenge.

Where can a model be found for the provision of such dynamic counter-cultural community? An encouragement comes with the recognition that the challenge facing 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians by the pervasive impact of the media is akin to the challenges facing the early Christian church during and soon after the New Testament period of Christian history. The cultural contexts are similar in many ways: For example, the core values of Post-Modernism are identifiable in the Greek (e.g. reason, humanism and democracy) and Roman (e.g. technological transformation, universal conquest) civilisations in which the Christian church was born and through which it spread as a counter-cultural community.

Classical historian Edwin Judge provides helpful insights on how the early churches coped with the clash of values brought about as the early

Christians sought to “be in, but not of, the world”. The formational aims in the churches of the New Testament era may be seen to be focused on the term ‘edification’, the building towards maturity of both individual believers and each faith community corporately, and the purpose of such edification was to develop in people and their faith communities the spiritual and moral values which would impact on the whole of their lives.<sup>17</sup> Christians were involved in the society around them, but biblical training and spending significant time in a supportive home and church-community was used to counteract any dangers which arose in terms of appropriate values to adopt. Thus, for example, people needed a liberal education (the basic numeracy and literacy skills provided by schools today). For many this was obtained in the context of life experiences (e.g. by apprenticeship), but those whose parents could afford to pay for a regular education remained fully within the secular system, even though these schools were upholding ideals that were in ideological conflict with Christian values and perspectives. The church leaders were confident that the impact of participation in the life and activities of the faith community would minimise or negate the impact of these schools.<sup>18</sup>

The same potential exists for effective faith formation in the midst of the media onslaught on the lives of Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Viable approaches can not be individualistic; rather the response of the church needs to be in the building of counter-cultural communities which – like the early churches – are deeply immersed in the affairs of “the world” but separated from its grasp, demonstrating lifestyles more reflective of God’s kingdom values and perspectives, and appropriating the abundant resources of the Spirit of Truth, the Spirit who teaches all things, the Spirit of power, and love and self-discipline.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> W. Andersen, A biblical view of education. *Journal of Christian Education*, Papers 77, 1983, pp. 15-30.

<sup>18</sup> See E. A. Judge: The conflict of educational aims in New Testament thought, *Journal of Christian Education*, vol. 9, June, 1966, pp. 32-45; The reaction against classical education in the New Testament. *Spectrum*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1985, pp. 22-27. It is interesting to note that for the first four centuries after Christ churches made no effort to establish their own schools. Then, paradoxically, this task was thrust on them by their opponents. The Emperor Julian (the last of Constantine’s house) determined to undo the work done by his uncle, and he withdrew the right of Christians to teach in the Hellenic schools, challenging them to try to train their youth in the churches instead. Forlorn enthusiasts took up the challenge.

<sup>19</sup> See John 14:26 and 16:13; 2 Timothy 1:7.

The quality of relationships within these communities is essential, as the early Christian churches demonstrated. Indeed, what Christians can do which the media cannot is to provide authentic personal contact and interaction. But this will require significant changes in the practical expressions of what is meant by Christian fellowship and community, for “how can I share your values if I don’t know who you are?”<sup>20</sup>

Within these developing counter-cultural communities, a relevant and meaningful approach to the media may be encouraged in at least four areas:<sup>21</sup>

1. **Awareness:** People need to be given the skills to evaluate what is being conveyed and portrayed by the media. Awareness implies comparison – and so it is important to ensure that what is being modelled in our church or faith community life is the essence of biblical Christian life and community. Carefully developing Christians’ redeemed minds will be crucial<sup>22</sup> to ensure that people are “thinking God’s thoughts after him”, and developing their critical faculties so that they are better able to recognise God’s kingdom values, so as to be discerning as they are exposed to the values of the media.

2. **Attitude:** Fruitful discussion of the media depends upon an open but informed attitude. Christians need not adopt a “head in the sand”, isolationist stance. Dialogue with the media is essential, with careful listening and watching, and affirming what is positive as well as highlighting those values and portrayals with which we disagree. There may be some surprises in the process, for example discovering that some supposedly ‘Christian’ media may not in fact be Christian, if the use of Christian themes or language disguises values not consistent with biblical perspectives and values.

3. **Artistry:** Good art and artistic values will reflect God’s standards. Thus if an episode in the entertainment media is immoral, it will not be good art; and good advertising will be truthful and realistic, enhancing the values of true humanity. Christians can be much more involved in media production (and the creative arts) with integrity, a by-product of which will be to break down the artificial distinction between ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’. Quality is

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<sup>20</sup> This is the title of an article by H. Mackay, *Values*, Autumn 1995, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Adapted from R. Kinast, “Dealing with the impact of the media,” *The Catholic News* (May 17, 1998), p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Romans 12:2; Ephesians 4: 22-24.

important: Christian broadcaster John Hawkesby's comment is telling: "People turn off from Christian TV or radio programmes not because it is Christian but because it is bad TV and radio".

4. **Authenticity:** As Christians seek to provide people with answers to their major quests – for transcendence, for significance, for community<sup>23</sup> – the effects of sin still need to be contended with. Efforts to bring about a Christian utopia by reversing the negative impact of the media, will not be possible in totality, but Christians can go considerably further in these areas than they currently do. What is essential is that those who claim to be the followers of the one who claimed to be "the way, the truth, and the life" live consistent with their stated beliefs, recognising the tension in being redeemed and yet still part of a fallen creation.

## Conclusion

When he wrote to the Christian church in the busy cosmopolitan city of Philippi, not noted for its high moral values and standards, the apostle Paul moved to round off his letter with this challenge, which may be seen to summarise the focus of this article:

... you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious – the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies.<sup>24</sup>

Two crucial principles are embodied in this quotation, when considering the impact of the media on Christian faith formation. The first principle – "filling your minds and meditating..." is something which is applicable to all who are seeking to grow in their Christian faith. But it can not be effectively achieved by individuals acting alone. Rather, the second principle is essential: When Paul states "put into practice...", he is accentuating the Christian principle of formation in the context of

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<sup>23</sup> J. Stott, Secular challenges to the contemporary church. *Cruce*, vol. 27, no. 3, 1991, pp. 2-8.

<sup>24</sup> Philippians 4:8-9, *The Message* (Eugene Peterson, Colorado Springs, Co: NavPress Publishing Group, 1993.)

involvement in a community of God's people seeking to develop their values and lives together in line with God's communitarian perspectives.

Is the media a help or hindrance for Christian faith formation? Use of, and exposure to, the media has positive aspects, but there are also substantial dangers in uncritical acceptance of it. Christians will be able to express a balanced perspective on it as they are actively involved in a setting which provides an appreciation of reality against which people will better be able to recognise the counterfeit. And the ideal place where this can happen is in communities of the Christian faith which are living with biblical integrity, and in which their own faith is being moulded and shaped.

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