

How Catholic organisations can engage the media

By **Darren Boon**

SINGAPORE – Avoid over-emphasising God and faith elements when pitching stories to secular news media. So said the deputy editor of Singapore's leading English daily on the sidelines of a Church-run media awareness workshop.

"This is not about hiding or concealing your (religion). Rather, it is about publicising your work and getting the media to cover you," said Alan John from The Straits Times.

Mr John, a Catholic, was speaking to UCA News during the May 28 "How to Engage the Media with Effectiveness" workshop organised by the Caritas Singapore Community Council (CSCC). The organisation heads the Singapore Catholic Church's social outreach programme.

Mr John, one of the keynote speakers at the workshop, said "established mission schools and community social agencies run by religious groups have no trouble describing the work they do, their mission, and who they help and why, and getting good coverage".

He advised 30

representatives of Catholic organisations at the workshop to have a media strategy, such as a spokesperson for the organisation, and decide how often they want to be in the media and work toward it.

Mr John, who has 33 years' experience in journalism, suggested organisations find out the names and email addresses of reporters through their bylines in the newspapers, write to them to introduce themselves, and stay in touch.

"Put a face to the organisation," he said.

He also explained why some stories get better play than others, and tried to show participants how to angle their stories in a way that interests journalists. He noted that what some organisations consider news, journalists may not.

He encouraged Catholic organisations to establish themselves as "go-to organisations" for journalists to approach when relevant issues regarding specific areas of expertise arise, so that the organisations are mentioned more often in newspapers.

He also said it is not realistic to expect newspapers to report

only good news, and taught participants briefly what to do should the media come knocking when things go wrong.

Catholic organisations including Morning Star Community Services (MSCS) and the Catholic Business Network (CBN) attended the event.

George Lim, 53, CSCC deputy chairman, told UCA News the workshop aimed to encourage Catholic organisations to use the media to inform the public about their work, and gain support for what they do. "The message we hope the speakers would bring across to the organisations is the need to communicate in a way which is appealing and engaging."

Daniel Tay, 29, a journalist from CatholicNews, the archdiocesan fortnightly newspaper, said organisations should know the paper's deadlines, and allow staff enough time to work on telling a good story.

Due to space constraints, CatholicNews is more likely to publish shorter articles, and sometimes a good photograph is enough to tell a story.

It is important for representatives to build personal

relationships with CatholicNews journalists, so that it is easier for Mr Tay and his colleagues to know more about the organisations. He said, "Face-to-face communication works better than over the telephone."

Participants also learned that their organisations need to constantly find fresh, interesting and unusual ways to maintain coverage in CatholicNews.

Daniel and Shelley Ee, who attended the workshop, said it had given them food for thought. The couple runs Marriage Encounter Singapore, which aims at improving people's marital lives.

They have been trying unsuccessfully to get coverage for their organisation in The Straits Times as journalists are reluctant to put "religious themes" in articles.

The couple said that after attending the workshop, they are now aware that inspiring stories and stories that impact society have higher chances of being published. "We're still thinking of a way to provide an inspiring story, an angle for the media to feature our programme and the good impact it has had on participants' lives," they said. □ UCAN