

Mel Smith Lecture, 2011

The Role of a Christian Press in a Pluralistic Society

By Lloyd Mackey

Trinity Western University

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Good evening students, faculty members and fellow public policy aficionados.

Thank you for extending to me the privilege of delivering the 2011 Mel Smith Lecture.

Preamble

In talking with you, tonight, I recognize that there are students here, as well as others, who are interested in public policy. The students may well come from political science, communications or business disciplines. As individuals, each may, because of the discipline in which he or she is studying, be looking for different take aways or handles from the lecture.

If I may, I would like to take a minute or two to identify some of these handles, so that you can use some of the conversations I describe or points I make, in the life you live beyond these walls.

One of my mentors is an outstanding Canadian pastor, now 84 and only just barely retired, Roy D. Bell. Edna, my wife, was his executive assistant when he was principal of Carey Theological College at UBC, back in the 80s.

And I had the rare privilege of editing a series of sermons he wrote around that time. It became a book called *Biblical Models of Handling Conflict*, and it is still available through Regent College Publishing, www.regentpublishing.com.

Later, Dr. Bell wrote a book called *The Five Minute Conversation*. It, too, is available through Regent College Publishing.

I am going to read part of the book's cover blurb – noting that it is aimed at pastors, but could be seen to have broader leadership applications.

According to Roy Bell, “the history of pastoral ministry is littered with the casualties of highly intelligent pastors who were unable to relate to or understand ordinary people.” What can be done? In *The Five-Minute Conversation*, Bell shows pastors, chaplains and counsellors, the importance of brief, casual encounters. He demonstrates the far-reaching

consequences that these conversations can have on peoples' lives—both negative and positive—and argues that paying more attention to brief encounters is crucial to successful pastoral ministry in our hurried society.

The reason for reading this is to lead into the strong suggestion that you try to listen to this lecture as a series of five-minute conversations.

They will relate things that I learned from mentors anywhere from four years to four decades ago. And they will speak of some of the events where what I learned became applicable and useful later on, sometimes much later.

Here are some of the “handles” that you might want to draw from, as you listen to this string of conversations. Hopefully, they will also provide grist for the mill when we have the question-and-answer session later.

- There are many Christian presses
- Pluralism is a reality within the Christian community and in the world at large.
- Knowing their Bibles
- Is Black Press a Christian press?
- Preacher, Publisher or Politician
- He walked the walk. He has earned the right
- The power of story
- A business and an institution
- Servant leadership
- Communities within a community
- Free speech vs. conflict study
- Seven aspects of publishing
- There are many in the field
- A Catholic press
- Of the making of books
- Two Novalis authors who help to lead in conflict study, management and resolution.
- Paying or being paid.
- Christian radio and television
- The new media
- Back to the beginning ... knowing your Bible
- Hezekiah's additional 15 years
- A brief epilogue.

With that said, we will proceed to the lecture. And, in so doing, we will be reducing consideration of those 21 “handles” from five minutes each to just slightly more than one.

Now to the lecture ...

It would be well to begin by paying tribute to Mel. We knew each other most of his life and I believe he would not mind if I said we were friends. He went into law and government, I, into journalism, but we kept in touch with each other through the years.

Very simply, Mel had a lifelong commitment to integrity in legal, governance and faith spheres.

Our acquaintance began in the Sunday School at Oaklands Gospel Hall in Victoria, in the 50s. Among the 300 or so students in that crowded little place, although not in the same classes, was Mel, Beverley, who later became his wife, and me.

Knowing their Bibles

Henry Smith, Mel's father, taught me Sunday school at one point, and so did Beverley's father, Harry Hill. Like most lay teachers in the Plymouth Brethren movement, of which Oaklands, and its successor, Oaklands Chapel, was a part, these men knew their Bibles.

And I will return to that point later.

To begin, it would be well to take note of the title of this lecture, and parse its parts to see that we keep a balance in the development of the theme. The title is: "The role of a Christian press in a pluralistic society."

There are many Christian presses

Let's start with "Christian press". When Robert Burkinshaw suggested the title, I think I knew what he was getting at. Christian historians and teachers see the written word as significant. They maintain that it is important not only to teach but to research and write. "Publish or perish," they sometimes say. So books are written in defence of the faith and the gospel. And while Christians are writing their books, people from other faiths and ideologies are doing the same.

Pluralism is a reality within the Christian community and in the world at large

And they are doing so in a pluralistic setting. Places of learning, books and periodicals – magazines and newspapers, and even church bulletins, to name just a few – all help to set forth the ideologies, histories, practices and stories of a myriad of political and religious movements. The men and women who are their teachers, gurus and spiritual leaders all contribute to the body of intellectual properties.

Is Black Press a Christian press?

The term "press" conjures up a range of images. My background in newspapering would lead me to think about a big newspaper press. The machine on which *BC Christian News* has been printed for many years is not, in precise terms, a "Christian" press. It is part of the Black Press organization, owned by David Black of Victoria. Black Press owns 150

newspapers, mostly community publications. They have 17 press centres in BC, Alberta, Washington State, Hawaii and Ohio – all places where they have newspapers. And they are just one of dozens of newspaper groups throughout North America.

As it happens, they have given good service over many years to *BC Christian News*, for a reasonable price. In the Black family background, there are both Presbyterian and Catholic influences, so maybe David would allow that his good service at a fair price is something that grows out of his family's Christian ethic. But I know that his community newspapers serve their communities irrespective of the religious or political beliefs of their residents.

One of David Black's predecessors was Cec Hacker, a contemporary of David's father, Alan, who owned the *Williams Lake Tribune*.

Cec was the publisher of *The Chilliwack Progress* when I first became involved in newspapering. He, along with Brian McCristall, the editor of *The Progress* at the time, taught me on-the-job journalism. It was an interesting process. They realized that my Bible college education had certain strengths, but required some adaptation.

Preacher, Publisher or Politician?

I remember Cec, who I would describe as a genial, gruff and godly growler, commenting on some of my attitudes, when I was first working as a reporter. One day, he growled: "the trouble with you, Mackey, is that you can't make up your mind whether you want to be a preacher, a publisher or a politician."

By God's grace, the elements of all three vocations, or callings, if you like, have been a part of my experience during the 40 years since the day he spoke those words.

Something else Cec said, one day, has helped me to understand better, about Christians relating in a pluralistic society.

At times, I had heard Cec respond with some scepticism to people who were very loud and boisterous about their faith, but not particularly ethical in the way they did church or business.

He has walked the walk. He has earned the right

One day, though, a national leader of the Salvation Army came in to the office, just before speaking to the local Rotary Club. He spent a half hour or so with Cec. At the end of the visit, the officer laid a hand on one of Cec's shoulders and began to pray. He was, to tell the truth, quite loud. He prayed for Cec and his family, for the newspaper and its employees, invoking God's blessing. He asked God as well, to enable Cec and his newspaper to be a shining light in the community, bringing spiritual strength and a sense of righteous purpose to its readers.

When it was all over and the Salvation Army leader had left, I asked Cec what he thought about it all, wondering if he might have been embarrassed.

Cec growled: “He is an officer of the Salvation Army and he has earned the right.”

I have sometimes used that story to caution exuberant, dogmatic or even marginally fanatical Christians to ensure that they are “walking the walk” before engaging in praying or witnessing efforts that might be misunderstood by their targets.

The pilgrimage over the past 40 years since those days, has been interesting, to say the least.

The power of story

I remained in community newspapering from 1967 to 1982, with a three year break in the early 70s to work with the United Church Observer. The editor, at the time, the late great A. C. Forrest, used to call me his “token evangelical.”

Al Forrest and my colleagues, Patricia Clarke and Jim Taylor, taught me how to tell stories about people in such a way as to illustrate or communicate a point. It was a good way, they said, to put flesh, so to speak, on values, beliefs, doctrines or ideas which undergirded the church and the gospel.

Today, we call that “the power of story”.

A business and an institution

Both my community newspaper experience and my return to schooling, in 1980 to get my MBA at Simon Fraser University, brought recognition that publishing a community newspaper or magazine is both a business and institutional endeavour.

There is always the temptation in periodical publishing to resort to a “takeover” form of leadership, based on the instinct to control or dominate a community. In the Christian world, populated as it is by people highly-motivated to “build the kingdom”, the tendency to dominate is sometimes more prevalent than it should be.

Servant Leadership

The antidote, interestingly, is one which is practiced strongly at this school. It is called “servant leadership.” It works on the premise that one earns the right to lead through being a good servant.

At times, when I have been an editor, I have sometimes been invited to speak to students about the newspaper I was editing and the community the newspaper was serving.

I would draw a rectangle with six circles inside it. The rectangle, with respect to The Chilliwack Progress, encompassed the boundaries of its service area: the Fraser River on the north, the US border on the south, the Vedder Canal on the west and Mt. Cheam on the east.

Communities within a Community

I would mark each of the circles inside the rectangle with a particular community within the community – the farmers, the business people, the educators and students, the military base, plus the members of various political and religious organizations. The assumption was that the newspaper served the larger community by linking each of the communities – in a way that no other institution, except possibly the radio station could. (The radio station was the competition and, of course, as a good and loyal print journalist, I could not possibly admit that radio could do it better than newspaper.)

Free speech vs. conflict study

I would like provide a couple of contrasting examples to illustrate a constructively Christian approach to covering a story – one that is different to what would be the mainstream norm.

That norm, indeed, emphasizes the need for conflict in covering a community and its events. That is necessary, to keep reader interest and, quite frankly, build readership.

Ted Byfield, pointed that out that need for conflict, when I was working briefly at *Alberta Report*, between Christian newspaper stints, to rebuild my cash flow. Byfield was the *Alberta Report* publisher and, as such, was a substantive leader in western Canada for many years, when his magazines were being published.

We were responsible to write our own headlines, and they were to be short. I had written about some Arctic research into the behaviour of narwhal whales in Northern Canada, nearby where oil exploration was taking place.

I wrote a headline that said “Oil and whales”. He called me over to the computer where he was editing my piece. He deleted “and”, replacing it with “vs” – short for versus.

“Every story has to have conflict,” he reminded me.

Now Ted was and is a fine Christian. But he is also hard-nosed and knows how to get conflict into a story. And it made his magazines better read as long as they lasted.

But the story I will use as a contrasting illustration is more recent.

You may recall that an inter-church advocacy and human rights group called Kairos had been turned down last year by International Aid minister Bev Oda, for a \$9 million grant. The turndown has caused quite a flap between a Liberal and Conservative MPs, John

McKay and Jim Abbott, both evangelical Christians. The issue was whether the government, supposedly pro-Christian, was discriminating against a Christian group on political grounds.

My information was that while the political theatre on the issue was continuing, Kairos was quietly rewriting their grant proposal to fit in with the government's new guidelines.

One newspaper reported this point, but buried it 14 paragraphs into the story, while leading with the conflict between the two MPs.

When I wrote my *OttawaWatch* piece, I brought the information about the rewriting of the proposal to the top – while cautioning that the story was not yet finished.

It was a less sensational story but was utilizing, in my modest view, a balanced and fair approach which could contribute to the solution, rather than continuing a political battle. It was a fair example, hopefully, of conciliatory, or at least collaborative, journalism.

Seven Aspects of Publishing

My studies and experiences also brought recognition that, as a business, the community newspaper represented more than simply people writing stories or taking pictures.

There are seven co-dependent aspects to the business of publishing. All seven need to be functioning together in order for the newspaper to do its communication job – that of linking various parts of the community.

Those aspects are: administration, editorial, advertising, production, printing distribution and community relations. I can safely say, I believe, that the success of *BC Christian News*, through these past 28 years, can be traced to the vigilance of the board and staff in maintaining the integrity of those seven aspects.

All this sounds formidable, I know. Especially when Christians are in pursuit of communicating truth, we can be very intense, to the point of writing and writing and writing about various things.

All the above, however, needs placing in some context.

There are many in the field

BC Christian News has served the British Columbia Christian community – and its fellow travellers – in a similar way to what Fellowship for Print Witness has done in Ontario and Manitoba with the *ChristianWeek* group of publications. Harold Jantz is the well-regarded founder of that group. Doug Koop and Kelly Rempel carry on the leadership on the editorial side and Brian Koldyk, on the business side.

And there are or have been others: *City Light News* and *Living Light News* located, respectively, in Calgary and Edmonton. *Maranatha News*, *Beacon Magazine* (and for some years, *The Endeavour*) and *Good News in London*, are or were located, respectively, in Toronto, Hamilton and London, Ontario.

Of course, there is a history of denominational publishing in Canada, as well, the *United Church Observer*, *Anglican Journal*, *Presbyterian Record*, *Canada Lutheran*, *Canadian Baptist*, *Mennonite Brethren Herald* and (*Pentecostal*) *Testimony* to name a few.

For some years, as indicated earlier, the *Report* magazines reflected a broadly Christian, generally politically conservative, approach to newsmagazine writing. Ted and Virginia Byfield were the inspiring vision behind those publications.

One of the keys to the continuing communication success – as well as one of the financial burdens – for many of the above-mentioned publications, has been the web presence they have been able to establish.

In the instance of *BC Christian News*, that presence, www.canadianchristianity.com, has proved very popular and given the work of Christian Info Society a national profile.

A Catholic Press

And when one closely observes the Catholic community, in both the French and English languages, it is easy to note that what has been happening in Protestant Christian newspapering is quite similar, although more loosely organized than, what has occurred in the Catholic community. Publications like *BC Catholic*, *Catholic Register* and *Western Catholic Reporter* are all as well known in the Catholic community as the Christian community newspapers to which I have referred are in the Protestant community.

Now, if I may, I would broaden these considerations to the roles of books, the electronic media and the new media.

Of the Making of Books ...

It needs to be noted that, most of the time, Canadian book publishers do not make money and often they do only because they get grants, either from public bodies like the Canada Council or from philanthropic organizations that support their particular perspective.

That fact is even more evident in Christian book publishing. That is because, while public bodies look askance at supporting obviously-religious book publishing, many Christian philanthropic organizations see book publishing as something that should stand on its own. They would prefer to support health, evangelism, education, relief and development projects, because they see those things as, somehow, more intrinsically Christian.

In this pluralistic world, books are used as weapons, as theologians and ideologues in all the great religions fight for the allegiance of their followers and their enemies.

Having said that, let me say that books do need to be written and published and the same seven aspects as were cited for periodicals need to be kept in mind.

In Canada, Novalis is a major Catholic book publisher. That does not mean all their books are by Catholic authors. But they do expect that the authors they publish will write within the broad context of Catholic belief.

Two Novalis authors who led in conflict study, management and resolution

Two Novalis authors I will note with interest.

One is Douglas Roche, who was, early in his career, editor of *Western Catholic Reporter*. Later he became a Conservative member of parliament, then a senator. He was also Brian Mulroney's "ambassador of disarmament", which was an intriguing title, given Mulroney's apparent interest in encouraging the development of a Canadian arms industry.

The other is Vern Neufeld Redekop, a Mennonite who heads the conflict studies department at St. Paul University in Ottawa. His seminal work, *From Violence to Blessing*, is worth a read.

Note that both authors come at their work from a biblical conflict study viewpoint, at the opposite end of the spectrum from where Ted Byfield has done his work – with a strong emphasis on free speech.

This, I submit, is further reinforcement that there are more than just one kind of "Christian press".

One of the chief focal points for mainstream Protestant and emergent Christian book publishing has been Wood Lake Books, in the Okanagan. My first book *These Evangelical Churches of Ours*, was published by Wood Lake in 1995, as one of a series on various segments of protestant Christianity, all written by editors active in their own particular segment.

Attempts at book publishing for evangelical authors have been spotty but nobly-based. Again, the difficulties have been mainly financial. BayRidge Books and Castle Quay, both led by Larry Willard, have been helpful. But many aspiring evangelical authors have had to rely on "subsidy publishing", where in effect, the author pays his or her own book published and marketed. Essence and Word Alive Press are two such examples.

Two service organizations, The Word Guild, based in the Toronto area and Inscribe, Edmonton-centred, encourage Christian writers to find their niche.

Paying or being paid

Many such authors believe, sincerely, that they have a message from God. They are willing to pay – rather than be paid – to get published, because of that conviction.

One such is a friend of mine, James Wardroper, who used to live in Vancouver but is now resides in the Muskoka, the lake country north of Toronto.

He is a retired engineer who also had a distinguished volunteer role in Christian-based social development in southern Africa for many years.

And he has an abiding interest in history, especially relating to politics, the military and faith in the medieval and pre-medieval parts of what is, today, France and England.

He has determined to write several volumes in a historical novel format, in part to show how early Christian fared, and almost disappeared in those periods and places.

The first volume is *Michmash Chronicles*. And the publisher is Essence, one of the subsidy publishers to whom I referred.

In being somewhat gripped by the book when I read it, I was trying to apply the conflict studies applications I have been somewhat immersed in, during my semi-retirement. Thus, I took an additional and slightly different message from his writing – the influences of tribalism and the primitive approaches in dealing in the pluralistic society of the day.

I hope he sells lots of books, but it will be a tough grind. But, at the end of the day, for James, the hope will be that the right people will have read it and drawn from its lessons.

Christian radio and television

Christian radio and television in Canada has been mainly a spillover from the United States, although some programs, like Lorna Dueck's *ListenUp!* have captured a fair amount of interest in the Christian community.

As well, she has been successful in communicating her message in the mainstream media, through her arrangements with the *Globe & Mail*. This gives her print and social media opportunities.

I should not neglect to mention, the significant role of Crossroads Television, founded by David Mainse, in encouraging faith-influenced television in the Canadian setting.

The new media

With respect to the new media: There are others here who have been involved in Christian communication for fewer years, but have mastered the new media more effectively than I have.

They would be able to tell you how the internet, social media and twitter, for example, helped to elect a liberal Muslim mayor in the conservative city of Calgary and a conservative Catholic mayor in the liberal city of Toronto.

But I can refer briefly to a “twitter” illustration.

One day, the Canadian Church Press, the association to which most Canadian Christian periodicals belong, sent me a note which ended with a biblical text, which read: “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossians 3:17 Soli Deo Gloria.

Good words. Just one problem. There are 168 characters. To fit into a twitter, there can be no more than 140. Those wanting to be the new media equivalency of a Christian press, in a pluralistic society, need to know things like the number of characters that a twitter will take.

Back to the Beginning ... knowing your Bible

But I will end this lecture by returning to the beginning, where I talked about Henry Smith and Harry Hill.

They really knew their Bibles. In best Plymouth Brethren tradition, they were not paid to know. They did so because they loved Jesus and wanted his word to be meaningful in the lives of others, close by in their own circle of influence, and far away in seemingly alien cultures. To the first end, Mr. Smith and Mr. Hill, as we respectfully referred to them in their presence, taught Sunday school. To the second end, they tithed their income, so that those in far corners of the earth could receive the message.

Hezekiah’s 15 additional years

Sometime during my Sunday school experience at Oaklands Gospel Hall, Henry Smith, Harry Hill or one of my other teachers took several Sundays to tell our class about the kings of Israel and Judah, portrayed in the Old Testament of the Bible. One of those kings was Hezekiah. He had been a good king, doing that which was right in the eyes of the Lord. He took sick and was about to die, but prevailed on God to give him 15 more years. God granted his prayer. But, unfortunately, Hezekiah went corrupt. So he did not give the nation the leadership that he should have, in his final years.

I remembered that story, and it came to mind four years ago, when I underwent triple bypass surgery. When I returned to the Press Gallery, in the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa, many people asked after my health, including some of the politicians about whom I had written.

My response to many of these people, was that I was grateful for renewed health and, by God’s grace, the implied extra years – and that the experience reminded me of Hezekiah.

Hopefully, I would say, I don't want to go corrupt in the extra years God has given me.

And, hopefully, they also heard me say, that I wished for them good, clean, spiritually-motivated lives, with leadership to match.

The lesson from the story: The kingly experience in a long ago holy land, transmitted to a young boy by someone who knew the Bible, provided opportunity for that young lad, toward the end of his career, to communicate Christianly in a pluralistic Ottawa setting.

Did it make a difference? I don't know for sure. But I can say that these conversations occurred during the time that the newly elected government was working up its accountability legislation, as an attempt to deal with corruption problems that had occurred under the watch of the previous administration.

A brief epilogue

A series of events occurred during the time that I was preparing to deliver this lecture.

Those events culminated in the decision to suspend publication of *BC Christian News*, the newspaper I had a hand in founding 28 years ago. A brief history of the paper is contained in the final edition, a few copies of which will be available after the lecture.

But that story, too, will hopefully continue, in various parts of Canada and beyond.

A possible successor to *BC Christian News*, in British Columbia, could be *The Light*, a Christian lifestyle magazine that Steve Almond, a former publisher of *BC Christian News*, has been working on for a couple of years – with, I might add, the aid of a federal grant.

Steve is here, tonight, and I commend his vision to you for inspection, discussion, consideration and possible participation. Like *BC Christian News*, it will have its administrative, editorial, advertising, production, printing, distribution and community relations challenges. I am not here to promote the project, but feel quite comfortable, as one of those *BC Christian News* founders, in telling you about *The Light* and encouraging you to engage Steve in discussion at the end of the evening.

Additional material:

Note to readers: What follows are two further stories designed to help reinforce some of the points made in the lecture. I told the Jim Pattison-Chandos Pattison-Glen Clark story the night of the lecture. The Geoff Tunnicliffe-Islamic Centre story was in my notes, but time did not permit its telling.

Jim Pattison-Chandos Pattison-Glen Clark story

Just down the freeway from here, a couple of miles toward Vancouver, is Pacific Academy, a highly regarded and prestigious Christian school.

British Columbia entrepreneur and industrialist Jimmy Pattison bankrolled much of the development of that school. And Chandos Pattison was his father

At the dedication of Chandos Pattison Auditorium, about 15 years ago, Jimmy Pattison talked about his father.

He told how he had owned a farm implement and automotive dealership in a small Saskatchewan town, Luseland, I believe, but had lost it all through hard times and drinking.

Chandos, Jimmy's mother and Jimmy had moved into Saskatoon, into a crowded one-bedroom apartment downtown, in order to try to recoup their losses and find their way.

One evening, pleading cabin fever, Chandos slipped out of the apartment and began walking the streets of the city. He came upon a little Pentecostal Church, heard the singing and went inside.

He found Christ there. His life was changed, and so was that of his family. He quit drinking and found a new sense of purpose. They moved to Vancouver where Chandos became the western Canadian manager for Packard, one of the luxury cars that prevailed before and after the Second World War.

Fast forward, to the years when Jimmy became a billionaire, owning many companies. He was and is known, as well, for his generosity toward Christian ministries like the one which had changed his father's life.

One day, in about the mid-90s, the premier of British Columbia, Glen Clark became ensnared in a scandal over gambling and influence peddling that led to his resignation. He was charged in connection with the case.

A week or so before the case went to court, Jimmy Pattison approached Glen Clark with an offer to have the former premier run some of his companies. Clark protested that his court case was pending and Pattison might find himself associated with a convicted felon.

Pattison said he was willing to take that chance. Next week, Clark was cleared of the charges, although the judge told him he had been a bit injudicious in some of his dealings.

A few years later, Doug Todd, the religion/ethics writer for the Vancouver Sun, wrote an extensive story about the Pattison/Clark business relationship, which had turned into a real success story.

On the surface, it appeared that Pattison saw many strengths in Clark. For one thing, he, as a former labour lawyer and NDP politician, understood the union mindset and could give good leadership in the Pattison companies that had union contracts.

But there was something else, I would submit. Jimmy Pattison, son of Chandos, knew what it meant to reach out and take some risks, for the sake of the gospel. And Glen Clark needed someone like that, at that juncture in his life, when many in his own party, even, had turned against him

If there is nothing else I can leave you, tonight, I would want to encourage you to walk the walk and reach out, so that, as a Christian, you can relate meaningfully to others, in a pluralistic society. So that people might observe that you have been with Jesus and want to draw him into their own lives, as well.

And, if you want to become a part of a Christian press, or a Christian communication network, that you will faithfully tell the stories of the interfacing of the gospel in a very diverse society. Or develop advertising that will pay the bills, or distribution systems that get the product into peoples' hands.

Geoff Tunnicliffe-Islamic Centre story

Geoff Tunnicliffe is a Canadian who grew up in the Vancouver area. He was, like Mel Smith, another of those Plymouth Brethren. His early working experience involved hawking Christian literature in crowded marketplaces in far off cities.

As he matured, he became educated and steeped in international affairs and Christian missiology.

I can recall, in 1997, when the World Evangelical Alliance held its global assembly in Abbotford, Geoff led a spinoff conference on the changing faces of Christian world mission, here on this campus.

A few years later, he became the director of the Alliance – sort of like an evangelical pope, if you like.

Let's fast forward to last fall, when a Florida pastor was threatening to burn 200 copies of the Koran. His plan was to protest the plans for a Lower Manhattan Islamic Centre in New York City, just a block or so from Ground Zero. That is where Islamists had rammed jets planes into the twin towers of the World Trade Center .

I had heard that Geoff, in his WEA role, had prevailed on the Florida pastor to forget his plan. He was one of a number of Christian leaders to do so and the collective pressure eventually succeeded.

I tracked down the WEA headquarters in New York and successfully reached Geoff by phone. His office is in Trinity Place, an office tower associated with Trinity Wall Street

Church, whose Episcopalian/Anglican congregation had been working in Lower Manhattan since 1697.

I asked him how far that was from Ground Zero and the proposed Islamic Centre.

He was a block or so away, the same distance as the Muslims are, on the other side.

What is the punch line in this story?

It is that the Christians have been in the Lower Manhattan neighbourhood for a while – for 304 years, to be precise. The Muslims have been there for a much shorter time, and have the stigma of one of their most radical spinoffs having killed close to 3,000 people nearby.

Geoff, as a leader of some 400 million evangelical Christians, has helped to position the WEA to be in a strategically significant position to help Christians in their interface with a pluralistic society.

And both Christian and mainstream communication vehicles, presses if you like, helped to give that message some exposure.