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**Christianity Today editor highlights crucial role of a free religious press
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CHARLESTON, S.C. (ABP) – Describing journalism as “fundamentally a moral enterprise,” editor David Neff of Christianity Today said a key role of Christian journalism is to “equip people to be good citizens of God’s kingdom.”

Neff was the keynote speaker at the annual meeting of the Association of State Baptist Papers Feb. 4-7 in Charleston, S.C.

Exploring the issue of “Why a Religious Denomination Needs a Free Press,” Neff told Baptist editors, “Everybody likes the sound of an independent press until it comes to certain kinds of stories and certain kinds of editorials.”

“Why should a Christian magazine report bad things about fellow believers?” he asked. Because such reporting “can help keep people honest” and “can help protect people from those who would take advantage of them.”

Citing such examples as fraudulent investment schemes and immoral behavior of influential leaders, Neff explained, “It’s important to report on these kinds of things to warn people away from such things.”

Heightened public awareness of such issues as international religious persecution and the sex-abuse scandal in the Catholic church is the result of an unfettered press pursuing stories of concern to readers, he emphasized.

An independent religious press “can give those in the movement a sense of the big picture,” Neff added. “God’s agenda is not just local and personal. It is regional and national and global.”

“Remember that the basic purpose of journalism is to equip people to be good citizens, to be informed citizens, to be responsible citizens,” Neff said.

Journalists “have to make value judgments all the time,” he added. “I don’t see journalism divorced from basic questions about the health of the community.”

Neff said publications should have clear policies to address the difficult ethical and news judgments that are likely to arise. Among those issues: the use of anonymous sources and off-the-record information, how to handle corrections and clarifications, the kinds of advertising it will accept, and the line between news and editorial opinion.

Offering advice on how to handle controversial topics, he said readers will tolerate negative news if a publication offers enough news that celebrates the good. Then a publication has to judge if covering a controversial topic is worth investing the time, supplanting other news and inviting potential criticism.

To make that decision, Christianity Today filters all such articles through a list of criteria to determine if it is newsworthy, Neff said. Among the questions asked: Does the average Christian leader need this information to be well informed? Can we provide information not available in other national Christian media? Can we provide accurate reporting on this topic?

When handling news about personal scandal, he said, the magazine asks another set of questions, including: Is the person a recognized Christian leader who influences a large number of people? Does he or she have the potential to do harm to a large number of Christians? Is he or she accused of violating a basic Christian tenet or practice? Is the person accountable to a group that has failed to take corrective action? Can the magazine correct or prevent erroneous reporting in other media?

And finally, he said, the publication has to ask: Is the accused person truly evil or “just an egocentric jerk”?

“There are times you need to do very aggressive reporting,” Neff said. “We are called to act in the public interest.”