

Unnoticed ministries: Why churches need to tell their stories

by [George Mitrovich](#) in the [September 18, 2013](#) issue

I am a Christian who leans toward the liberal side of politics. I associate with lots of urbanized and sophisticated liberals, many of whom are not men and women of faith. Few of them have any idea what churches are doing to serve their communities. I've concluded that faith communities need to do a better job of telling their stories.

Pat MacJennett, a senior executive in the convention and tourism industry, in discussing with a reporter her agency's marketing strategy, said that an organization that fails to tell its story is rejecting Marketing 101. "If you have a great story to tell but you are not telling it, no one's going to hear it." In a world of Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Skype, YouTube and e-mail, the means of telling your story are greater than ever.

I know that clergy are not eager to add "press secretary" to their list of duties. But pastors who have never visited a newsroom of a local newspaper, never had contact with a television or radio station or never had lunch with a local publisher or media executive have missed an opportunity. If a pastor can't find time to do this work, it's likely that someone else in the church is skilled in public relations or media and knows how to write a news release and call a press conference.

I know several churches in the San Diego area that make a major contribution to our city and region. But not all are good at telling their story.

For example, First United Methodist is a major player in providing social and cultural services. In 2012, through its members and clergy, First United ministered to more than 1,200 prisoners; presented choral concerts attended by over 3,000 people; participated with San Diego City Schools in the Everyone a Reader Program, helping hundreds of kids learn to read; each Sunday distributed more than 100 meals to families in need; offered more than 100 turkeys on Thanksgiving and Easter so those without means could have a traditional dinner; provided dinners once a month to

more than 1,800 people; offered conferences led by the parish nurse on such pressing concerns as care for Alzheimer's patients; gave flu shots to congregants; had 500 people participate in tributes to the memory of Martin Luther King Jr.; and through its counseling center provided therapy to more than 1,000 people in need, regardless of means to pay.

Some people within the First United Methodist congregation know this impressive story. Most do not. And if a church's own members and friends don't know what a congregation is doing, there is no chance that the wider community knows.

Solana Beach Presbyterian is located in an upscale community just west of Rancho Santa Fe, one of the most exclusive zip codes in the nation. I had imagined the church as simply a wealthy white congregation until I met several of its members who told me about the Hispanic ministry that engages and energizes the church. I would not have expected Solana Beach Presbyterian to be on the cutting edge of such a ministry. I had to ask, "Who knows this story?" People in the church know it, but the community and region beyond have little or no awareness of it.

Rock Church of San Diego is intensely involved in the community under the leadership of Miles McPherson, a former NFL player, drug addict and alcoholic, who experienced a dramatic conversion. In one year alone the total number of hours Rock Church members contributed to civic volunteer work exceeded 600,000. McPherson estimated that the church's in-kind contributions to the city topped \$10 million (a fact not lost on the political leadership of San Diego).

On Good Friday of this year, with more than 4,000 gathered for worship at Petco Park, home of the San Diego Padres, and with 500 Rock volunteers on hand, the church partnered with several ministries to benefit the San Diego Food Bank (4,000 pounds of food donated), God's Extended Hand, Monarch Schools and Kaiser Bloodmobile (67 pints of blood). "Easter is a time of hope, and for every way people can be lost, we want to find a way they can be found," said McPherson. This was just one day in the life of this extraordinary ministry of civic engagement.

In the case of Rock Church, however, the congregation not only does great things; it tells people about what it is doing. The church does this through news releases and by making sure that local TV and radio stations and assignment editors know what it is doing. And once a year McPherson issues a "state of the church" report.

Yes, Rock Church is big and has its own communications department and lots of resources. But the issue is not simply a matter of size. It's about making the effort to publicize what the church is doing. It's about following the command of that great spiritual, "Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere." It's about telling about Jesus—and telling about what Jesus' followers are doing in his name.

When my liberal friends dismiss church and people of faith, I realize that part of what is going on is that they are just ignorant about all that churches do. They are ignorant in part because churches are silent about what they are doing.