



PEGGY WEHMEYER: WORLD NEWS TONIGHT TO WORLD VISION On Religion In National Media . . . and Faith In the Arena

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Article:

In 1989, Peter Jennings pulled Peggy Wehmeyer out of local television in Dallas to join *ABC World News Tonight*, where she broke ground as the nation's first network religion correspondent. For the next seven-and-a-half years, American viewers followed Peggy's award-winning push for truth into the faith-and-culture issues of U.S. presidents, gay marriage, prisoners, Muslim clerics, Rabbis, abortion, school shootings, academicians, missionaries . . . and in a particular coup, her hour-long special with the McCaughey parents and their new septuplets.

In 2002, Peggy joined World Vision to help found and host the *World Vision Report*—a weekend newsmagazine and daily feature show on issues and events affecting the world's poorest people. (WVR currently airs on more than 300 Christian radio stations; all programs are available at WorldVisionRadio.org)

Here, Peggy Wehmeyer talks about religion and the national media, World Vision, and living faith at work.

Your journalism career has moved you from the religion beat in Dallas television news to *World News Tonight*, and now to "justice and mercy" radio one of the world's largest humanitarian-aid groups. How did you feel about leaving mainstream news and cultural issues for Christian compassion?

This is odd, but I didn't really see myself as leaving a secular job for Christian work. I saw myself as going into the same kind of work. As a journalist, I was still going to do the very best storytelling I could. This time, instead of focusing as I had for 20 years on culture wars such as gay marriage, abortion, and prayer in school, I'm focusing on issues to do with justice and poverty—a whole new realm for me. The kind of religion news the secular media is open to covering is very limiting; this opened new avenues for me.

What kind of stories are you doing now?

Today, I interviewed a senior executive at the World Bank. Another day, I might interview an African journalist who covered starvation by living in an Ethiopian village on a piece of bread a day for five weeks. Or a little schoolboy in Canada who raised thousands of dollars to build wells for poor kids in Africa. I recently interviewed Paul Farmer, the Harvard-educated physician in Haiti.

It's the same work: I'm a journalist trying to tell stories with fairness, accuracy, and creativity. But as a host and managing editor, now I get to do different things, and the credible. This isn't about culture wars any longer; I now have the freedom to write about global issues of poverty and justice—the world is wide open. I can't remember a time when I've learned more about the world.

There must be a big difference in the two work environments.

Well, the main difference between a secular and Christian workplace is that it seems too easy now. I was so used to struggling against the current, advocating and fighting for the voice of people of faith. I'm still surprised, not that the work is easy, at how much fun it is. I think it's partly because there are fewer battles . . . after 20 years in a secular newsroom, I'm working with people who share my ideals and values.

I'm a strong believer in Christians living and working in the secular world. I didn't ask God to lead me into a "Christian workplace," but He did. And I'm enjoying it. If He takes me back to the mainstream media, I'll go willingly. World Vision isn't just any organization for me. It's a Christian organization that's at the top of the list of the ones I've respected and admired from a distance over the years.

Can you say more about your struggle in mainstream media?

Externally, it was the fight for air time for stories that were fair and balanced about people of faith—to make room for legitimate voices from the world of religion, not just caricatures and stereotypes. I worked to tell stories about the predominant religious voices in our country with respect and dignity, because that's not how it's always been done.

How has it typically been done?

The media tend to make assumptions about the major religious groups in this country. The two largest groups in terms of their impact on culture are conservative Catholics and Evangelical Christians. Together they easily make up 30 to 40 percent of the American population. Those two groups, if you take it out of the mouth of Nicholas Kristoff of the *New York*

Times, are the two most acceptable groups for the East Coast media to despise and marginalize.

How did that attitude affect you?

On my best days, I believed I shouldn't be surprised. I rarely got angry at the individuals or people who I felt were hostile toward traditional Christian beliefs. I was sometimes sad, though, and discouraged at so little understanding or tolerance for different ideological points of view. On my weaker, less heroic days, I felt wounded and discouraged and frustrated about my inability to accomplish all I dreamed to do with this beat, with the religion beat.

Your job description was to get to the bottom of stories involving different faiths and to tell them fairly. Did an assignment ever cause you to struggle with your own beliefs?

Of course. And at times my own faith got wobbly. As a good journalist, you try to see the world through the eyes of the people you're interviewing. You want to understand what they believe and tell it as closely to what they believe as possible. To do that well, you must empathize and understand both sides of a contentious issue. Yes, it challenged my faith. It made me question many things I had just assumed. It also broadened me greatly, caused me to think deeply, and to reassess what core beliefs in my faith I really could hold and count on.

I've always been a truth seeker; what I wanted was the truth regardless of the cost. What I found to be true—that I wished weren't true—is that we have to live life much more in the gray than in the black-and-white.

So you still have doubt?

I'm a huge doubter and a skeptic. It's part of what makes me a good journalist and a lousy Christian. My friends say it makes me a good Christian. Let's say it makes me a sometimes overly intense and troubled Christian.

What do you mean by "more in the gray than the black-and-white"?

As I mature, there are fewer things I am certain about and many more beliefs that I hold onto lightly. At the same time, some of the essential core beliefs are rooted more deeply than ever. When I was younger and less exposed, I assumed God worked a certain way in the world. When all those assumptions are challenged daily, you're constantly reshaping your paradigm of who God is and how He works.

So how did you take your Christianity into your work world?

Right in the beginning, I had to decide: would I stay in the closet, or would I be as unashamed of who I am and what I believe as my colleagues were about who they are and what they believe? Because of the kind of person I am, for me to hide the core of who I was would be almost lending credence to the argument that I was ashamed of being a Christian or that there was something inferior about it.

There were times when I wished my personal life were invisible and not an issue. I sometimes had to jump through three extra hoops as a religion reporter, because my colleagues thought that a Christian covering religion was an inherent conflict of interest. I would argue: is an atheist, a Jew, or an agnostic inherently less biased than a Christian? Why would a Christian be less able to be objective than anyone else? All of us have personal worldviews and biases. Why would mine disqualify me and others not disqualify them?

You were vocal about your Christian beliefs?

You have to be careful with that. If you're asked or challenged, you shouldn't be ashamed. I didn't go around preaching, ever. But if we were at dinner after work, or traveling, and everyone said what they thought, and I was asked what I believed, I didn't hesitate to share how my faith shaped my views on life.

What provokes the negative reaction to Christianity?

First, any religion that calls its followers to complete devotion to one person, namely Christ—to surrender and accept Him as the way, the truth, and the life—will be unpopular in America's post-modern culture. "The way, the truth, and the life" is construed as narrow-minded and intolerant, which is the worst sin in today's world.

Second, plenty of Christians give the critics a lot of ammunition. There are Christians who can be narrow-minded and intolerant in the worst ways. But so can any other human; it's common to the human condition.

In a similar vein, now looking at national news as a more typical viewer, how would you assess the news we receive?

I think most of the news we're getting, depending on the subject—and who you're watching or reading or listening to—is pretty fair. I mostly trust what I'm hearing. On political and cultural hot-button issues, I'm skeptical.

To slightly change direction, what would you say to people wanting to live out their faith at work daily?

I'd say what I tell my kids, and that's never to compromise. Be willing to suffer for what is right, and trust God with the outcome. Stand strong for what you know is true, no matter how many people tell you to go the other way. I remind them they can do this because we believe this world is not our home, and whatever price we pay for not doing what's popular is nothing in comparison to what Christ endured.

I have teenagers in public schools whose situations are every bit as tough as mine was. All of the things that make a girl popular in high school, most of them, are the opposite of what they know to be true, so they struggle with this every day.

Must a Christian forever draw lines and take stands?

I could write a book on what it takes to live out your faith well in a secular workplace, but a few short things that are true, and what I tell my kids . . .

First, I would say that your strongest witness in any workplace is your competency. St. Francis of Assisi said to preach at all times, speak only when necessary. Preach the gospel with your high standards of performance. Shoot for excellence in what you do. Not out of pride, but because it reflects God's glory. Only then have you earned the right to be heard on your personal beliefs, which some will find troubling. But you earn that platform by earning their professional respect. So fighting the good fight doesn't just mean holding on to your faith, which is a challenge on its own, but excelling in your level of competency in the workplace. If you can do that, you're well on your way. And when you speak about your faith, it can be natural, authentic, an overflow of who you are—not forced, planned, outlined. In a way, you should be able to talk about your faith the same way you talk about what you're having for lunch.

And number two?

Number two is to never be a phony. If your faith is not a living part of your daily life, don't speak about it. People can sniff a hypocrite a mile away. Don't speak of your faith because you think you should. If it's not an authentic, living part of your life, get your personal spiritual life together first, then share who you are in that respect.

Make sure when you do talk about faith that it's not from a set of guidelines of witnessing, something from a book you've read. Make it relevant to the person you're speaking to.

Again, it's like high school: if your goal is to be popular and well-liked, forget it. If your goal is to tell the truth about who you are, you may end up being popular and well-liked. Or you may be threatening to people. But that's not for you to worry about. The goal is not to be popular; the goal is to be true to Christ, and to who you are—to let the chips fall and trust God with the results.

That does take faith.

And courage . . . you have to practice spiritual disciplines to have an authentic Christian life in a very secular workplace. If you take good care of your spiritual life and work in a secular workplace, it takes wisdom and shrewdness to share your faith in a way that is relevant to your colleagues. It's not an easy thing. And I emphasize shrewdness—wise as a serpent, innocent as a dove.

Don't make success your aim. Make faithfulness your aim.

Do you see yourself as an ambitious person?

Not in the career sense. That's just not me. I'm driven and a perfectionist and goal-oriented, but I'm not ambitious to get to the top or to be famous, or for material things. That's not to say I don't enjoy those things when they come, but those aren't my goals. I'm probably the kind of person—and not everyone should necessarily be this way—driven by the desire to influence and have an impact on my world.

What spiritual disciplines got you through network television reporting?

These are imperative; you can't stress these things enough. First, to stay in the struggle—and it is a struggle—have regular time apart with God. That was a big struggle, but I could always tell a difference in my life when I did and when I didn't. To stay centered with God, you have to have a regular consistent time of prayer and meditation—prayer and exposure to Scripture.

The second thing—for me, almost as important—was intimate fellowship and accountability with a small group. Like regular time with God, you need regular time with a small group of people who will pray with you, hold you accountable, and accept you unconditionally—the body of Christ.

Those were the two main things that kept me on track spiritually . . . kept me anchored.

To hear Peggy Wehmeyer on the World Vision Report, go to WorldVisionRadio.org