



A Conversation with Tim Johnson

**A doctor, journalist,
and minister shares
his thoughts on faith
and the media.**

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In the spring of 1969, Tim Johnson was finishing up his medical studies when he made a decision that would someday change the course of his life.

He decided to watch the evening news.

“The way I figure it, if I hadn’t watched the evening news that night, I wouldn’t be doing what I am doing,” says Johnson, now medical editor for ABC News and associate minister at Community Covenant Church in West Peabody, Massachusetts.

That night’s newscast featured a report on the American Medical Association (AMA). The AMA was opposed to the appointment of Dr. John Knowles, head of Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, as undersecretary of health. Among other things, Knowles supported universal health care.

“The trustee that read a statement at the press conference was so bad that when the press started asking him questions,” says Johnson, “he just totally discombobulated. He made kind of a fool out of himself, and indirectly out of the organization.”

By coincidence, Johnson received a letter from the AMA the next morning, asking him to join. Johnson wrote a note on the reply card: “If what I saw on the evening news last night is any indication of your competence, I am not interested in joining.” He tossed the card in the mail and forgot about it. A few weeks later Johnson got a long letter from the head of the AMA, full of additional accusations against Knowles, none of which rang true to Johnson.

“Now I was kind of interested in this,” says Johnson, “so I sent the letter off to John Knowles in Boston, say-

ing, ‘This is what happened, I thought you might be interested.’” Johnson and Knowles exchanged letters, and later became friends when Johnson went to work at Massachusetts General.

In 1972, Knowles and some associates were awarded the license to operate the ABC station in Boston. One day at the hospital, Knowles asked Johnson to host a show on health issues. “He talked me into doing it as a personal favor,” Johnson says. “I would go into the station in the morning for this half-hour program and then go to work at the hospital.” In 1975, he began appearing on ABC’s *Good Morning America*, and went to work full-time for ABC News in 1984.

Companion editors Jane Swanson-Nystrom and Bob Smietana talked with Johnson about his views on the way religion is covered in the media, his experience as a Christian working in television, and his views on the ways that modern medicine looks at spirituality.

Covenant Companion: Many evangelical Christians see the media as liberal or anti-religion. What do you think of that assessment?

Tim Johnson: When you talk about the media, especially electronic media, I think you always have to make a separation between the news division and the entertainment division. By and large, I think the entertainment division is amoral and anti-religious—not always, by any means, they do some thoughtful programming—but in general the commercial entertainment divisions are at the very least secular. And from a personal point of view, most of what they put on I think is at best junk and at worst immoral.

But I don’t work for them. I work for the news division, and believe it or not the news division does have somewhat different standards than the entertainment division, which some would say has no standards at all anymore. In the news division, our responsibility is to try to report the facts, whatever area we are working in. I think it’s hard to argue that the news division is immoral

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CC: Where are places the media is doing a good job covering religion?

TJ: Just from a personal point of view, I am impressed with the coverage in both the two major newsmagazines, *Newsweek* and *Time*, especially *Newsweek* because of Ken Woodard, the religion writer there. He is a superb writer and journalist. I think there is increasing coverage at the higher level of the media, but I am not enough of a student of the media to comment in general.

CC: What about on a personal level, not as a student but as an observer?

TJ: I think that any major news operation, either local or national, has to, by definition, devote more time than they now are to covering religion, because of the simple fact that religion and religious practice play a prominent role in the lives of many Americans. I think if you look at the amount of time and energy and emotion that most Americans devote to religion and the coverage on television, they are not commensurate. One could argue, just on a rational basis, for more coverage. Obviously, the nature of that coverage also has to be discussed because all too often it just degenerates into reporting that so and so said this, and there is no depth or substance or analysis to it.

The media, the part that I know about in electronic television, have been really inadequate on a factual basis in reporting on religion. The other side of that coin is that religion is such a sensitive topic in so many ways that the media are often afraid of it. Not unwilling, but afraid. Afraid that they will get it wrong or make a mistake or offend. Sometimes the easy way is to just not do it.

Think of even in the *Companion*, when Jay Phelan, writing to a rather homogeneous group that he knows well, writes on something controversial and the kind of reaction that you get. Well imagine what happens when you go into a huge secular/religious audience with a wide range of viewpoints, the kind of reactions you get.

CC: What kind of reaction did Peter Jennings get when he did his “Search for Jesus” special?

TJ: By and large, he got a positive response and the ratings were very good. But he got a very vociferous response from the more conservative wing of Christianity because they felt it was unbalanced. [They complained that] most of the scholars in the piece, except for a brief N.T. Wright sound bite, were from the left wing of the theological spectrum, and that the historical, theological viewpoint was also from that spectrum. I think that is a fair criticism.

CC: How do people in the newsroom look at conservative Christians? Do they have a negative or positive viewpoint?

TJ: Again, I can only speak authoritatively on the one newsroom I know, which is at ABC. Much like the American public, the spectrum of opinion of people who work in the ABC newsroom is all over the map, from conservative to liberal to everything in between. What I can say, with a high degree of certainty, is that the vast majority of them work hard at being objective. They really do try to simply figure out and report what’s being said or done, and not put a twist on it.

Now you could argue that the real twist comes in what they select to do in the first place, and therefore I think it’s important to monitor the selection of coverage in any news organization. But I have seen it firsthand, day in and

day out, and they work hard at trying to get it right and trying to be fair.

CC: What are some of the ethical issues that journalists are facing these days—such as pressure to get things right away, with the Internet and twenty-four-hour cable stations? How do reporters do fair and balanced stories in that kind of marketplace?

TJ: It's the number-one issue in journalism in general today, and even in medical journalism—mainly, the tremendous competitive pressure to be first and, hopefully, also to be right. When I started full-time with ABC in 1984, 90 percent of the viewing audience watched just the three networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS. Today, about 40 percent watch the five networks, if you include Fox and CNN. So, just in fifteen years, you have had an enormous splintering of the media pie. It's much more competitive than it once was, and that drives people to do things faster than they should. And again, it's not that they don't want to be accurate, it's mostly that they don't have the time or, increasingly, the resources to do as good a job because of the cutbacks in staffing.

CC: How have your roles of being a minister, a doctor, and a journalist worked together?

TJ: I'd like to think that all of them have a common denominator in the sense of being of service to people, albeit in different ways. That's what attracted me to the ministry in the first place, and when I was exposed to hospital work as part of my seminary training I became intrigued with the very direct and often relatively quick way that doctors could be of help to people. That's probably why I went into medicine, though I am not sure I can ever figure that out.

When you get into journalism, I suppose, it's a little less clear that that's what you are doing. But I have always thought of myself not so much as a journalist but as a teacher—I didn't go to medical school with the idea of being a medical journalist, I became involved

very accidentally in that field. So I have never thought of myself as a television person, but as a teacher who happens to be in television.

CC: Do you get any response from viewers from the fact that you are also a minister?

TJ: Yes, and it has always been positive. That doesn't mean that there is not a negative response, it's just that I don't hear it or see it. But yes, I always get a positive response in the sense that people are, I guess I would say, I don't think it's too strong a word, delighted to hear it. And I always get letters that say, "We kind of figured that you might be a Christian" or a believer or something like that. But it was interesting for them to find out explicitly that it was the case.

In terms of my internal role at ABC, I have become a sort-of unofficial chaplain to many of my colleagues there, because they know I am a minister. And they will call me for advice in certain personal matters, they always call me for advice on medical matters, and I have had some ongoing and very interesting dialogues with quite a few of my colleagues at ABC who are agnostic but very interested in exploring. So we have had some extended conversations that have been very interesting.

CC: Let's change topic to the issue of spirituality and medicine. It seems every other week there is a story about the benefits of prayer and/or faith on someone's health. Could you speak to what you have noticed on the renewed interest on that subject.

TJ: I could talk about that for hours. But in brief form, there has been, without a doubt, a sea change in overall attitude on the part of medical establishment toward the role of religion and faith in patients' lives. Back in the 1960s, when I entered medical school, by and large the attitude of the medical establishment was one of disdain, skepticism, ignorance. Today, it's much more positive and open, even though I am not going to sit here and say that more practicing physicians are believers than there were then. But whatever their personal point of view, they are much

more open and respectful of the potential positive role that faith can play in their patients' lives. So I have seen an enormous change at the personal level in the everyday practice of medicine in a positive direction.

At the research level, there has also been an explosion on interest in the role of faith and patients' health, recovery, and general well being. I have to say that the majority of that research is not very well done in traditional rigorous scientific fashion, meaning that you control all of the variables that could contribute to this outcome and focus on and isolate just the variable of

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faith, or whatever it is. However, there is enough good research, particularly on variables that are easier to measure, namely religious practice, church attendance, or prayer, or Bible reading.

Where it gets really dicey and much more complex, is trying to measure the role of prayer in healing. There are studies that show that, but again they are usually not very well done from a rigorous scientific point of view. This is absolutely worth studying, but I think we have to be careful from both a scientific and a theological viewpoint. Scientifically, we have to be careful that we do really rigorous studies so that we don't bring embarrassment upon ourselves and churn out research that the medical and scientific world will quickly recognize as inadequate. Theologically, we have got to be very careful not to turn religion or prayer or God into a commodity to be sold and manipulated for healing. But with those qualifications, I think it is a different world and a much more positive one than it was when I started out thirty-five-years ago in medicine. □