Church photographers often find themselves shooting lit stages. Following are some tips for getting good photos of people on those stages.

You may have noticed that lead photographers at major church events seem to have the same equipment—big, black, and heavy. The first trick of stage photography is to buy a long lens with a 2.8 maximum aperture, whether Canon or Nikon. But if all you have (or can rent) is a lens with a 3.5-5.6 aperture, follow the instructions below to get the best results from that lens.

Whatever camera you have, a 70-200mm 2.8 lens with image stabilization will improve your stage photography more than buying a new camera. At $2,500, the new lens may cost more than your camera, but it will outlive several cameras.

Once you have the best camera and lens you can afford, follow these steps:

1. Set the mode to M instead of P. The M does not stand for Macho. Anyone can do it. I used to think shooting in Manual meant there were three settings I had to continually adjust. But just the opposite is true. It is easy for anyone.

2. Set the aperture to the widest opening available. On the 70-200 that is 2.8. You will keep that setting until the meeting is over, so now there are only two settings to adjust.

3. Set the ISO to the highest setting at which you normally get good, clear pictures in low light. On many cameras that speed is ISO 400. But if you aren’t going to crop it severely or enlarge the pictures to magazine cover size, you can go higher. Maybe to 800, 1600, or even higher. But the higher ISOs will never produce as clear a picture as at 400, so keep it there if you can—for the rest of the meeting. But don’t forget to set the ISO back to a lower number when you go outside in the daylight. There, you will probably want the lowest ISO the camera is capable of.

4. Now you have only one setting to adjust
the remainder of the meeting. Set the shutter speed to 1/60 of a second. If the faces are burned out, speed it up to 1/125th second, 1/180th, or 1/250, or higher. Shutter speed is the only setting you will tinker with the rest of the meeting. If 1/60th of a second is too dark, then you may have to increase the ISO to a setting higher than you wanted. You may be able to shoot at 1/30th of a second without blur, but only if neither you nor the people on the stage move much.

The result is confidence. If the first speaker looks good at the settings you have chosen, then the next 100 pictures of that person will also be correct. All you have to think about is composition and focus. If the next speaker has lighter or darker skin, adjust the shutter speed up or down and resume shooting with confidence.

Shooting in Manual mode seems scary the first time you do it, so try it when the pictures don’t matter much. But I have never known anyone to try it and then go back to “P” (Press and Pray) mode for pictures on a lit stage.

There are a few other settings you may be wondering about.

**White Balance**—on a lit stage, automatic WB often produces pictures that are too orange or red. I usually set my white balance to the picture of a light bulb (incandescent). But if you walk outside and forget to set the WB back to automatic, your photos will be disastrously neon blue. I have made that mistake more than once.

**Focus Area**—I almost always set the camera to focus on the smallest point. That lets me select the exact part of the picture I want in focus. When you are shooting with a long lens and a wide aperture (like 2.8), if the performer’s eye is in focus, her ears and nose will be slightly out of focus. If your camera accidently focuses on the wall behind the speaker, the picture will be unusable. If you want more than one person in focus, make sure you are directly in front of them so they are both exactly the same distance from the camera—then focus on one of them, not on the space between them.

**Light Meter**—your camera lets you decide how you want to measure the light; for the whole stage, a single point, or a compromise between the two. This setting makes no difference in Manual mode, so don’t worry about it.

**Focus Mode**—your camera probably lets you choose Manual, Single, or Continuous (or servo) focus. Don’t use Manual. The choice of Single or Continuous is very important. I often change this setting several times during a program. Single lets you put the focus on one person’s eye, hold the shutter button down half-way, then recompose the shot without changing the focus. That is great, unless the person you focused on moves closer or rather away by even a few inches while you were recomposing. If that happens a lot, change to continuous focus, which will change as the person moves. But this creates another possibility for a serious disappointment. If you are shooting two or more people and you focus on one, then recompose to get both people in the picture, the camera will quietly change the focus to the area visible between the two people. This can be very disappointing when you don’t notice the problem until you view the pictures later on your computer and find that all the people are out of focus.

And that’s all there is to good stage photography: spend money, shoot in manual mode. But that is only for stage photography. For outdoors and flash, I mostly use Program or Aperture Priority. We will cover that in future articles.

Gerry Chudleigh is Communication director for the Pacific Union. He is recognized as an excellent photographer among his colleagues. We thank him for this mini-series, wherein he kindly shares his knowledge and skills for getting a great picture.
Why the Effective Caption is Crucial

Writers with a serving mentality take the time to write effective captions for readers.

Most readers aren’t going to read your entire story, and many won’t even start reading. But some research suggests that a caption is likely to be the only text on your page that’s read word-for-word. That’s because it appears below the thing a reader’s eye is drawn to first—a picture.

The Associated Press style suggests news photo captions—or “cutlines”—should generally contain two sentences:

First sentence—uses present tense to describe what’s going on in the picture. It also includes the location and date the picture was taken.

Second sentence—uses past tense to offer context by describing why the photo is newsworthy.

For example:

Harlan Frubert smiles big while showing his reddened stomach, much to the envy of nearby dejected Belly Flop contestants at the Eastern Conference Retreat Center pool on June 19. Amid increasing competition, Frubert put on 15 pounds in the off-season to maintain his champion status, winning the competition for the fifth consecutive year.

Note how specifically the first sentence is written. Think of yourself as needing to explain the picture to a blind person. A concise, engaging explanation in present tense brings the scene alive. Notice, you can’t even see the picture in the example above, but it’s easy to imagine how it might appear.

Also, look how easy it is to tack on a location and date at the end of the first sentence. That’s a great place in a caption to slip in the journalistic elements of Where and When.

“A concise, engaging explanation in present tense brings the scene alive.”
Soaring to New Heights
Albuquerque, New Mexico
October 18-20, 2012

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Of course, there are exceptions. If there isn’t space, a caption writer must combine content from the two sentences into one sentence. Also, when the picture is an older file photo, the two sentences can be reversed and the date written less specific. For example:

Adventist Risk Management is urging church leaders to reassees their insurance policies on all properties. Here, the British Union Conference building after a fire in 2009.

You can't force readers to read everything you write. But you can serve them by making it easy for them to figure out if they wish to continue reading.

That’s why effective story ledes start with the most important part of the story—the climax. Essentially, you’re spoiling the ending. So to drive reader eyeballs to your story, the second sentence of your caption is essentially—but not word for word—the same concept as the lede of your story. Doing this serves your readers by saving them time while reading your magazine or website. They’ll soon figure out what the story is about and make a decision whether or not to continue reading.

Here’s an example of how the second sentence does a good job of summarizing the entire issue: http://bit.ly/u2GtsL.

Most readers won’t even notice you’re using a caption formula. They’ll just receive information clearly without even realizing what made the caption effective.

The first sentence draws them in. The second sentence sends them away gracefully.

—Ansel Oliver is the editor of the Adventist News Network. He holds a master's degree in journalism and blogs about journalism tips at journalismpatterns.blogspot.org.