

First United Methodist Church

Crisis Communication Plan and Media Guide

Once the crisis is over or has come to light, your leadership will need to move directly to a communication's plan. While you can't predict WHAT the crisis will be (active shooter, child's death, fraud by an employee) you can follow a systematic plan for addressing the needs of the victims, staff, congregation, and public. Remember, how you handle this will speak volumes about your organization and how you take control of a difficult situation.

First, know that everything you think you know (or at least half of it) in the first 24 hours has a good chance of being wrong, whether it be due to confusion, misinformation, or lack of details. SLOW DOWN and walk through this process with a clear head and as intentionally as possible.

Stop the Immediate Flow of Information

- **Front desk-** Ask the front desk person to take messages if there are calls from the media and/or congregants. Prepare a written statement that conveys the front desk employee is not authorized to respond to any questions. They can use this statement as a response to the calls if pressed for information.
- Choose **primary and secondary spokespersons**; all media requests should be routed through her/him.
- Let congregants, families, and staff know that communications will be forthcoming as soon as possible. Do this via social media, text capabilities, app push notifications, and/or the website. Remember: Anything you say is for public consumption. Also ask **church members to refrain from answering media questions** or speculating at this time.
- Work closely with **law enforcement** to know facts. Do not circulate anything that is NOT proven true or feels like rumor.
- Do not speculate, opine or predict outcomes.
- Setting a physical boundary around the church letting media know they cannot come past a certain point is okay and legal, as long as it does not include public spaces like sidewalks.

Assemble Your Crisis Communications Team

- Pastor(s)
- Administrator
- Chancellor or lawyer
- Communication's Director
- Human Resources
- Board leaders
- Anyone crucial to the event (Dayschool Director, Accountant, etc.)
- Any congregant with expertise in this area
- Third party validators

Plan to meet every hour on the hour (or every several hours) for updates. Set up next-phase teams. Studies show there is a "hit the wall" slope at 72 hours. Who will continue to put the plan into place at that point?

Ask These Questions

- What happened, what has occurred?
- What are we CERTAIN we know?
- What do we THINK we know?
- How will we monitor this information?
- What is our biggest challenge and concern with communicating this?
- What is the best way to communicate it?
- What questions can we anticipate?
- Who is going to communicate this?
- What happens if we do nothing? (i.e. not talk to the media)

Decide Point People for Communications

Who will communicate with:

- Employees
- Church members and families
- First responders
- Media
- Phone calls

It is essential to **communicate DIRECTLY with these stakeholders, families and employees** being the first. When you are experiencing a controversial or negative event, remember that people prefer to hear from primary source and not second hand. Do NOT use the media to communicate with these individuals. The most important message you want to convey may be different for your stakeholders vs. the media.

Working with the Media

- If you decide you are going to talk with the media, decide if it will be in a prepared statement, press release, or press conference/interview. Also decide if any social media will be used and, if so, what the message will be. In this day and age, having a **point person** specifically dedicated to monitoring social media during this time would be a wise idea.
- Breaking news interviews require **10-20 seconds responses** (be succinct and exact in your responses). Offer all answers in 20 words or less.

Immediate Messaging May Contain

- What are the immediate needs?
- What will be the long-term needs (if applicable)?

Key Messaging

- The most important thing here are the victims involved. Make sure responses are empathetic.
- This incident does will not define us. We will help shape the future by it.
- Pivot back to organization's mission/ core values. Practice speaking core "mission" in plain speak; practice repeating it 3 or 4 different ways Offer 2-3 *explicit* examples/stories to illustrate mission "that looks like this..." (offer real life instances).
- Turn negatives into positives. (Rather than "The Methodist Church has rules that forbid gender equality which has caused great divisiveness." vs. "The Methodist Church is working constructively to address differences of opinion in our denomination but our congregation and many others throughout this country support gender equality and are actively participation in the discussion to change our Discipline.")
- Reinforce who you are.

Key Messaging Tips

- "Lead from the head, respond from the heart."
- Let law enforcement relay the facts. Keep your focus on your congregation, victims, staff and their needs. Defer to local authorities for questions you cannot answer or info you do not have.
- Give accurate and thoughtful answers. If you do not know, ask to call back/get back in touch.
- Don't admit fault until legal facts support that position.

After the Crisis

Afterward, it will be important to go back and assess the situation from a fresh perspective that now has a little distance on it. Ask these questions:

- What did we do right?
- What could have been done better?
- What was overlooked?
- Could this have been prevented?
- What are we doing now?
- What will we do in the long term?

Long-term Concerns

- Establishing a Memorial
- Fraud scams
- Civil/criminal trials
- COOP
- Continued Grief counseling/ PTSD

Local Newsrooms

- news@fox7.com
- news@kvue.com
- news@keyetv.com
- news36@kxan.com
- news@statesman.com
- edonahue@kut.org
- newsroom@klbj.com
- news@dailytexanonline.com, UT Newspaper
- News 8/ Spectrum News: txnewsdesk@charter.com
- Univision: ismartinez@univision.net

Additional Media Tips for All Occasions

Prepare

- If doing a broadcast interview, send media talking points upfront to educate the interviewer about your position and organization.
- In studio interviews last 2-3 minutes tops.
- Source the media and the audience. Know the person you are talking to. If the audience is trade (other churches/Christian faith groups) talk in their language. If audience is mainstream, avoid church jargon.

Answering Questions

- Answer questions head on, avoid being vague, use hard verbs and descriptive words. ("We serve breakfast to the homeless." vs. "We serve a nutritious breakfast to approximately 350 homeless neighbors twice a week.")
- Human interest stories are key – bring color and personality by offering examples of yourselves or members or those we've helped.
- Decline answers if off topic or have no expertise.
- Don't be afraid of "dead air," know when to stop talking; don't yammer on.
- If you're not sure of the question, please ask to repeat. Don't pretend to hear the question if you did not.
- Avoid drama and gotcha questions, and "bad" guy vs. "good" guy (stay away from WORLD magazine – put Caritas on the hot seat).

Presentation and Delivery

- Look at the reporter, not the camera.
- Practice talking and smiling in front of mirror as you're driving; practice talking out loud to develop confidence.
- Stand up if possible to increase energy level.
- If sitting, sit forward, cross angles and turn at slight angle.
- Don't be afraid to ask reporter to change location, pivot away from facing the sun, or away from crowds (know what is behind you).
- Clothing: blush, mascara and lip color but not gloss and solid bright or jewel tone colors for women; stay away from black and white (ministry cloak is an exception); for button down shirts with jackets for men; slacks sometimes better than dress; keep at stash of makeup and blouse/jacket at the office.
- Don't wear clunky jewelry; keep it subtle.

Follow-up

- Ask reporter to let you know when story will air or print.
- Send follow up email once you've seen piece, either correcting any inaccuracies, OR thanking them for their attention.