



CRISIS COMMUNICATION STEPS: BEST PRACTICES FOR CONGREGATIONS

Understanding crisis communications

A crisis is an event or circumstance that occurs suddenly, often unexpectedly, and merits a timely response. (Examples: financial fraud, personnel problems.) The key to effective crisis communication is being prepared before a crisis occurs.

Steps to being prepared

1. Assemble a crisis communications response team. This team should include:
 - the senior pastor;
 - one or two staff members, including the person responsible for communications;
 - a lay leader, such as the president of the congregation; and
 - other members of the congregation council if needed.
2. Determine who will serve as the designated spokesperson to respond to all media inquiries. The spokesperson should be the only one who will communicate with the media during the crisis. Choosing a secondary spokesperson would be helpful in the event the primary spokesperson is not available.
3. Distribute the crisis communications team member list to all staff and designated laity such as the congregation council, committee leaders, etc. Post the list in all offices and common areas such as the copy room, meeting rooms, etc.
4. Prepare a “holding statement” in advance of any crisis. The statement is used to respond to media calls in the immediate aftermath of a crisis, while certain facts are still being gathered. The statement should include prayers for the victim(s) of this situation.

The crisis communications team should regularly review holding statements to determine if they require revision and whether additional holding statements for other scenarios should be developed.

- A key element to crisis communications preparedness is developing a positive working relationship with the media personnel who cover your community. Get to know both the religion reporters and general assignment reporters and become acquainted with the newspaper editors and radio and television news directors and assignment editors, including the weekend assignment desk. Establishing positive relationships with the local media is extremely helpful because in the event of a crisis, reporters and editors will know you are a trusted source.

AN EXAMPLE OF A HOLDING STATEMENT:

First and foremost, we pray for the victim(s) of this situation and all those who are affected.

Our crisis communications team has implemented its crisis response plan, and we are in the process of collecting all the information about this incident/situation.

We will supply more information as it becomes available, and we will post this information on our website.

- Make sure that your congregation registers for any emergency warning systems established by your local or state government. Emergency alerts can be sent to any cell phone, mobile device, email or land line.

When a crisis occurs

A crisis is defined as an incident that occurs with the potential of diminishing trust in an organization and causing damage to its reputation in the community.

For a congregation facing a crisis, the impact on stakeholders can be far-reaching. A crisis will not only affect your members, it can have an impact on your congregation's ministries and could damage the congregation's reputation in the community. The crisis communications plan should be implemented to keep your members and the community informed.

Implementing the Crisis Communications Plan

If you learn of the crisis in a call from the media:

1. The person receiving the call should decline to answer specific questions but assure the reporter that someone from the congregation (the senior pastor or communications staff) will return their call. Make sure to find out the reporter's deadline and how best to contact them. Details to gather:
 - a. reporter's name and telephone number,
 - b. media outlet,
 - c. reporter's deadline,
 - d. information the reporter is seeking (also note what information the reporter already has – correct as well as incorrect information), and
 - e. time and date of the call.
2. Contact members of the crisis communications team, providing them with the information received. Plan to meet as soon as possible in person or via teleconference. The meeting should take place within minutes or hours, not days.
3. During this first meeting, the crisis communications team should review all the available facts of the situation and update the holding statement.

EXAMPLES OF CRISES INCLUDE:

- incidents involving the congregation's leaders, members or constituents during an event on church property OR a church-sponsored event or ministry at a site other than the church (i.e. youth trip, mission trip, senior outing);
- incidents involving people served by a congregation's ministry, even if the congregation's involvement is only to provide space (day care, community groups, AA or NA meetings);
- clergy or staff potentially facing criminal or civil charges related to the congregation; and
- disasters that could include fire, floods, etc.

Questions to answer:

- Where are we getting our information and is it reliable?
- What is happening? Where is it happening?
- When and how did we first learn about it (call, email, etc.)?
- Are evacuations necessary/underway/complete?
- Who is in charge (law enforcement agencies, other)?
- Is there any damage? Are there injuries or deaths?
- What local health and safety agencies are dealing with this crisis? Are they equipped, or do they need assistance?
- What is being mentioned in the local press? National press? Global press?
- What is the worst-case scenario?
- What do we want to tell others who are inquiring about this incident?
- Do we need to put together a Q&A for internal or external communications?

The crisis team should identify:

- members of the congregation who need to be informed immediately; and
- members of the community who need to be informed immediately.

4. The designated spokesperson should return media calls, providing them with the holding statement.

Gathering the facts

Understand the current situation as thoroughly as possible before making any statements – externally or internally (including communications to leaders). Facts that should be secured include:

- location and time of incident;
- how and when the incident was reported;
- whether the crisis is a physical or natural disaster, a result of human agency, etc.;
- any safety, security or other implications for the congregation's staff; and
- any legal implications?

Write initial statement

Once details of the situation become available, the crisis team should write a statement for the media and your stakeholders – both members and the general public. The statement should:

- call for prayers for the victims and all those affected by the situation;
- include only details of the situation that have been confirmed as fact;
- indicate that the pastors and staff of your congregation are aware of the situation;
- hold the safety and security of the staff, congregation and community as a top priority;
- if applicable, indicate that subsequent statements will be issued, along with the timing of those statements (if possible); and
- be approved by the crisis communications team before the statement is released.

Determine statement dissemination process

The crisis communications team will determine the best methods for internal and external distribution of the holding statement. This will include deciding on:

- the best method to keep congregational leaders, staff informed;
- when it is appropriate to keep members informed;
- when and how to engage with members of the press;
- the appropriate web and social media strategy; and
- whether a video statement or press release is necessary.

Spokesperson returns calls from media, as far in advance of deadline as possible, to either provide the factual information requested or to learn what specific information is needed. Simultaneously, other key leaders in the congregation and/or community are alerted to the crisis. The communications staff makes assignments for monitoring media coverage of the crisis.

What to say when you speak to the media

Your initial media responses should communicate the prepared statement. Use confirmed facts only – try to include the basics of what happened and what the congregation is doing to respond.

- Names of victims and those involved should be shared only when appropriate.
- Don't guess, speculate or speak outside of your expertise. It's OK to say, "I don't know. I can check on that." Don't play down or exaggerate the situation.
- Refer to policies and procedures when you can't discuss specifics.
- Check your emotional attitude. Express concern and compassion when appropriate.

Follow-up media responses could include one-on-one interviews or a press conference, depending on the scope of the crisis.

- Have a prepared statement available to ensure you communicate all the facts correctly.
- Keep the statement short and simple. Choose your words carefully. A 15-minute interview could be edited down to a 15-second sound bite. Is it what you want repeated? Think carefully as you speak.
- Refer to policies and procedures when you can't discuss specifics.
- Speak slowly, naturally and confidently. It's OK to pause between key points.
- Make eye contact with reporters. If possible, don't read off a script. It's better to look at your notes, pause, look up and make eye contact while you speak.
- If you don't understand a reporter's question, ask the reporter to repeat or clarify the question. Again, it's OK to pause before answering.
- NEVER say "This is off the record" or "No comment" (even if the reporter is a friend or you know the person very well).
- Conclude the interview or press conference when you've given all the information that you're prepared to release at this time. You can say something like "I understand you have more questions, but that's all of the confirmed information we have right now. We will update you in (fill in the blank)."

The time of your next scheduled update will depend on the seriousness of the crisis, the interest level of the media, the time of day, the amount of information that's available, etc. You may want to email or fax additional information to the media instead of holding another briefing. If possible, make any press releases or written information available on your website.

Taking calls from the media

1. Take a written message (don't transfer to voice mail without taking message).
2. Get the reporter's name, media outlet, phone number and deadline.
3. Ask what the story is about.
4. Explain that a spokesperson for the congregation will call back.
5. Don't answer questions yourself.
6. Be polite but firm.
7. Keep a record of media calls.

Handling casual conversations or questions about a crisis

1. Don't speculate, repeat unconfirmed information or express personal opinions.
2. Don't feel as if you must answer questions.
3. Do respond with a brief, positive, general statement.

Example response:

"I want to make sure we give you the most accurate and up-to-date information. Our [communications lead] or [pastor] or [appropriate person] can best help you. If you give me your contact information, deadline and topic that you're calling about, I'll have that person return your call as soon as possible."

If you learn of the crisis from a source other than the media:

1. The team member learning of the crisis gathers the crisis communications team in person and/or by telephone. The spokesperson or designee makes assignments for fact-gathering and sets a report time.
2. The crisis communications team meets to assess the facts of the crisis and the first response. The team determines if the congregation should be proactive in releasing a statement about the crisis to the media.
3. The spokesperson or designee responds to media inquiries as received.

Guidelines for handling media on-site

1. **Identify a location where reporters and photographers may park vehicles and stand while they're covering the story.** Identify a place that allows privacy for the congregation (you should not allow the media to have "free run" of your property) but acknowledges that reporters and photographers have a job to do.
2. **You will have more control** if you designate a location for the media to stand rather than throwing them off the property without discussion. The location will probably be on the edge of church property, in an area where the media does not block authorized people from entering

the church or jeopardize anyone's safety. Be aware that television trucks with "live" capability (microwave or satellite) can't operate near telephone or electrical wires. The media will probably ask for more access than you're willing to give them – you should be prepared to say "no" to many of their requests. However, it's often a good idea to listen their requests to determine if there's a mutually agreeable location.

3. **Designate a staff person to explain and enforce the boundaries.** If police are involved in the situation, you should work with them to establish and enforce boundaries. The staff person can say something like "Our priority right now is to make sure everyone is safe [the first sentence may say something different, depending on the situation]. We are gathering information right now. As soon as we have the facts, we will have a spokesperson available to talk with you."
4. **Be polite but firm.** At some point, you'll probably have to ask the media to leave the property or move to the designated location. For example, if photographers and reporters are trying to interview staff in the church parking lot, you should ask them to leave the property. Try to avoid unnecessary hostility or confrontation.
5. **As far as the law is concerned,** a photographer can take pictures of any people or things as long as the photographer is standing on public property. You can't stop a photographer from standing across the street from church property and taking photographs of people at the church. However, if a photographer is standing on church property and you ask the photographer to leave your property, the photographer should leave immediately. You should be aware of local laws regulating demonstrations near church property.
6. **Be proactive.** If you see a photographer or a reporter interviewing people or taking photographs or video on or near church property, you or a designated person should introduce yourself and find out what they're doing. Be polite but take control.
7. **Establish an interview location.** Find a quiet office or conference room for reporters to conduct interviews.

Ongoing communications

1. Determine what additional communications pieces or resources are needed to answer questions (on site, on the congregation's website, through social media, through voice-mail messages, etc.).
2. Partner with staff and congregational leaders to work through the crisis situation as needed. Provide ongoing information as appropriate.
3. Continue working with the crisis communications team and others to determine what additional actions and communications are needed depending on the scope of the crisis. Ongoing and post-crisis communications should be considered for both internal and external audiences.
4. Closely document all crisis details, related communications and outcomes. This information will help as you continue monitoring the situation and will be important with any follow-up or evaluation.

Evaluation

Evaluate your congregation's crisis communications efforts. What worked well? What didn't? What should be considered for next time? Update the crisis communications plan following this important evaluation.

Parts of this resource were shared from the crisis communications plan of Advent Lutheran Church in Morgan Hill, Calif.