



Crisis Communications Planning: Best Practices for Congregations

A crisis is an event or circumstance that occurs suddenly, often unexpectedly, and merits a timely response (examples: financial fraud, personnel problems).

For congregations facing a crisis, the impact can be far-reaching. A crisis can affect not only your members but also your ministries. It could also damage your congregation's reputation in the community.

The key to effective crisis communications is being prepared before a crisis occurs.

First Steps to Prepare

1. **Assemble a crisis communications response team**, including:
 - a. The senior pastor.
 - b. One or two staff members, including the person responsible for communications.
 - c. A lay leader such as the president of the congregation.
 - d. Other members of the congregation as needed.
2. **Determine who will serve as designated spokesperson for all media inquiries.**
The spokesperson should be the only one to communicate with the media during a crisis. Choose a secondary spokesperson who can serve if the primary spokesperson is unavailable.
3. **Distribute a list of the crisis communications team members to all staff and designated laity.**
 - a. Congregation council, committee leaders, etc.
 - b. Post the list in all offices and common areas.
4. **Prepare a “holding statement” to have on hand.**
 - a. The statement will be used to respond to media calls in the immediate aftermath of a crisis while the team is still gathering facts.
 - b. The statement should include prayers for any victim(s).
 - c. The crisis communications team should regularly review the statement, revise it as needed and develop additional holding statements for other scenarios as needed.

5. **Develop positive working relationships with the media personnel who cover your community.** In the event of a crisis, reporters and editors will know you're a trusted source.
6. **Make sure your congregation is registered for local, state and/or federal emergency warning systems.**

Being Prepared for a Crisis: Elements of an Effective Crisis Communications Plan

Develop a process for initial response.

1. **If you learn of the crisis from inquiring news media, the person receiving the call or email should decline to answer specific questions but assure the reporter that the congregational spokesperson will return their call/email.** Make sure to find out:
 - a. The reporter's name, phone number and email address.
 - b. Their media outlet.
 - c. Their publication or broadcast deadline.
 - d. The information being requested.
 - e. The time and date of the call/email.
2. **Contact members of the crisis communications team and provide them with the information received.** The team should meet as soon as possible in person, by phone or via video. **The meeting should take place within minutes or hours, not days.**
3. **During the meeting, the team should receive all available facts and update the holding statement.**
 - a. **Work to answer these questions:**
 - i. Where are we getting our information, and is it reliable?
 - ii. What happened or is happening? Where and when did it happen?
 - iii. When and how did we first learn about it?
 - iv. Are evacuations necessary/underway/complete?
 - v. Who is in charge (law enforcement agencies, other)? Are there legal implications?
 - vi. Is there any damage? Are there injuries or deaths?
 - vii. What local health and safety agencies are dealing with this crisis? Are they equipped, or do they need assistance?
 1. Is the crisis a physical/natural disaster or a result of human agency?
 2. Are there safety, security or other implications for church staff?
 - viii. What is being reported in the local, national or global press?
 - ix. What is the worst-case scenario?
 - x. What do we want to tell others who are inquiring about this incident?

- xi. Do we need to assemble a question-and-answer document for internal or external communications?
- xii. Which members of the congregation and community need to be informed immediately?

b. Updated holding statement should:

- i. Call for prayers for any victim(s) or others affected by the situation.
- ii. Include details of the situation that have been confirmed as fact.
- iii. Indicate that the pastor(s) and staff are aware of the situation.
- iv. Prioritize the safety and security of the staff, congregation and community.
- v. Indicate that subsequent statements will be issued (if applicable), along with the timing of those statements (if possible).
- vi. Be approved by the crisis communications team before it is released.

c. The team should determine the best methods to distribute the holding statement, including:

- i. The best method to keep congregational leaders and staff informed.
- ii. When it's appropriate to keep members informed.
- iii. When and how to engage with the press.
- iv. The appropriate web and social media strategy.
- v. Whether a video statement or press release is necessary.

4. The designated spokesperson should return media calls/emails if needed, providing media with the updated holding statement.

- a. Names of victims and those involved should be shared only after they are made public / when family approve.
- b. Don't guess, speculate or speak outside of your expertise. It's OK to say, "I don't know. I can check on that."
- c. Refer to policies and procedures when you can't discuss specifics.
- d. Check your emotional attitude. Express concern and compassion when appropriate.

Determine process for ongoing communications.

- **Continue working with the crisis communications team and others to determine what additional actions and communications pieces or resources are needed** to answer questions: in-person, church website, social media, voicemail messages, etc. Ongoing and postcrisis communications should be considered for both internal and external audiences.
- **Closely document all crisis details, related communications and outcomes.** This information will help you to continue monitoring the situation and will be important for evaluation.

Things to Remember

- **If you do follow-up media responses, which could include one-on-one interviews or a press conference:**
 - Have a prepared statement available to ensure that you communicate all the facts correctly.
 - Keep it short and simple. Choose your words carefully.
 - 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 from a script.
 - If you don't understand a question, ask the reporter to repeat or clarify it.
 - NEVER say "This is off the record" or "no comment."
 - Conclude the interview when you've given all the information that you're prepared to release.

- **When handling casual conversations or questions:**
 - Don't speculate, repeat unconfirmed information or express personal opinions.
 - Don't feel that you must answer every question.
 - Respond with a brief, positive, general statement. For example: "I want to make sure we give you the most accurate and up-to-date information. Our [appropriate person] can best help you. If you give me your contact information, I'll have that person return your call as soon as possible."

- **If you host media on-site:**
 - Identify a location where reporters and photographers can work when they're not covering the story.
 - Designate a staff person to explain and enforce boundaries.
 - Be polite but firm.
 - Be proactive.
 - Establish an interview location.
 - A photographer can photograph any people or things as long as they are standing on public property.

Conduct an 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 after-action review.