Church Crisis Communication – How to Prepare & Respond

*by Alli Costello, Communications Director*

According to UMC Communications, “A crisis is an event which threatens the viability or the reputation of your organization and which triggers media or public interest.” We may feel like churches are safe havens. Nothing bad can possibly happen in “God’s House”. Unfortunately, bad things happen everywhere. Smart church leaders think about every eventuality. We create and adhere to policies & procedures, so that there is less chance of crises happening and purchase insurance policies to serve those harmed and protect church assets.

Before the crisis occurs, you need to consider how you will respond to the media should they decide to report on an incident involving your church. You need to develop a documented plan. You must train your staff accordingly. We can all think of situations that went from bad to worse when the spokesperson was rudely defensive or sweating profusely and incoherent. A crisis communication plan helps churches feel more prepared, confident and minimizes damage to its reputation in the community.

Your first call should be your District Superintendent(DS), who will decide if a Crisis Communication Team needs to be formed. You and your DS (and any relevant parties) can draft a preliminary message when the incident first occurs in preparation for the event that the media *might* call. Do NOT inform the media.

Anyone who might be answering the phone should be prepared to communicate with the media.  They should not be defensive or say “No comment”.  They should log all calls and information shared.

Receptionist Script to post next to the phone:  *“Thank you for your concern.  I’m unable to answer your questions but perhaps my pastor (or program director) can*.  (If not available) *Unfortunately, she’s not available at the moment.  Please give me your name, number, media outlet and your deadline and she’ll contact you as soon as possible."* Do not respond to follow-up questions about the incident. Just say, *“I’m sorry. I don’t have that information.”*

Pastor/Director Statements

Here are some initial statements you could tailor to your purposes:

* The safety of all who are part of the \_\_\_\_\_ ministry is our highest priority.
* We're cooperating with the authorities (whichever authority you’re working with) as they investigate the accident/incident.
* We’re reviewing our policies and procedures to ensure that they’re as effective as possible.
* We’ll provide an update when more information becomes available.

More informed response – Draft message and stick to it.

* *Confirmed* facts on what happened (without names)
* Explanation of church response (i.e., policies & procedures)
* Expression of care and concern for those involved
* Explain how you are ensuring that this will not happen again.
* Never lie, but it is possible to “frame” the situation to minimize damage to the church. A Crisis Communication Team may be necessary to decide upon an appropriate response.

Strategies to Consider

* Decide if stakeholders need to be notified prior to the media & how to address them (i.e., closed door meeting of all youth parents)
* Decide on spokesperson for newspaper/TV interview – pastor, DS, director of program, well-spoken parent or church member involved in program in question.
* Discuss possible follow up questions – What is necessary to ensure this does not happen again?  What changes need to be made in policy/procedure?  Is additional training necessary? Does anyone need to be dismissed?  Do we require legal counsel?
* Do not admit or assign blame.  Do not speculate about possible causes. No matter how comfortable you are with the reporter, do not be flip or joke. If you do not know, say you do not know and will get the information.
* TV/Newspaper interview – Practice several times with a group to go over the message and appearance.  Avoid using swivel or rocking chairs, clothes with busy prints or swinging jewelry.
* Consider the background – Avoid church signs, logos or banners, children, loud noises or distractions.
* If Interviewer tries to go off topic, calmly “Bridge” back to your main statement — For example:

*Reporter: “Do you think your daycare will have to close its doors as a result of this accident?”*

*You:  “What I can tell you is that the safety of the children in our care is our highest priority. We’re doing everything we can to work with the authorities to ensure that this never happens again.”*

We hope that ratings-seeking investigative reporters never darken your door. But, if they do, it does not have to be a catastrophe. Frame the message in a way that proves that you are a compassionate part of the community and you are doing everything in your power to care for affected individuals. If you would like more information on creating a crisis communication plan, contact the Conference Communication Director, Alli Costello at alli@nmconfum.com or 505-255-8786, ext. 111.