

Local Church Crisis Communications Sample Plan & Template

This document is a template that local churches can adapt to meet their own specific circumstances and needs. Review the template closely and determine where the plan may need to be modified. The final version should be printed in an easy-to-read format, placed in a binder with divider sheets and distributed to church staff and everyone on the crisis team. Keep a copy handy in the office. Use it frequently to practice your responses.

This sample plan and template contains the following information:

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CHARTING A CLEAR COURSE: CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

"Before the crisis happens—and it will..."

1. Use this template before a crisis occurs to chart a clear course through the troubled waters that crises bring.
2. **Realize that the Crisis Communications Plan is only *one* part of the church's Crisis Management Plan.** Establish protocols for dealing with security and safety issues when a crisis occurs or is imminent.
3. **Develop Crisis Communications Team contact lists.** Provide billfold lists (laminated, if possible) for all members of the team. *Post* the list in all offices where calls regarding crises are likely to be received.
4. **Update these lists *at least* every six months. The contact lists should include by name:**
 - Pastor(s)
 - Program ministry directors
 - Key lay leaders
 - Pastor's administrative assistant
 - District superintendent
 - Annual conference director of communications

For each person, list:

- Name
- Work Telephone Number
- Home Telephone Number
- Cell Telephone Number
- Pager Number
- Assistant's Name
- Assistant's Home and Cell Telephone Numbers
- Spouse's Name
- Emergency Contact with Telephone Numbers (*this should be someone who always knows where the person is*)

5. **Have the Staff/Pastor-Parish Relations Committee either join the staff in developing the Crisis Communications Plan or in endorsing it.** Have the S/P/PRC present the plan to the Administrative Board or Administrative Council for *adoption*.
6. **Use a staff meeting to fully acquaint members with the plan and their roles.** Review the plan at least once every six months. *Practice!*
7. **Develop a positive working relationship with the media who cover your community.** Know the religion reporters or those reporters who usually cover religion. Get acquainted with the newspaper editors and radio and television news directors (including the weekend directors).

8. Determine your church's policy for dealing with requests from the media for information in *non-crisis* situations.

Establish who on the staff can respond to reporters' calls immediately.

Determine what information can be given by anyone on the staff (*confirming the spelling of a name or a title, numbers who attend worship, calendar information*)

Establish a protocol for notifying other members of the staff that a reporter has contacted the church.

Be proactive in providing good news story tips to the media in your community.

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Crisis Communications Plan

_____ United Methodist Church

Introduction

“A crisis can be considered anything that puts the church’s values on trial in the court of public opinion.”

The following procedures are to be implemented any time an incident occurs with the potential of diminishing trust in the church and its ministries or of damaging the church’s reputation in the community.

Examples of situations in which these procedures are to be implemented include incidents involving:

- Church leaders, members or constituents participating in an event or ministry on church property;
- Church leaders, members or constituents participating in a church-sponsored event or ministry at a site other than the church (examples: youth trip, seniors’ outing, VIM or other mission trip, Bible School field trip)
- People served by a ministry of the church—even if the church’s involvement in the ministry is limited to providing space (day care center, hot lunch program, exercise class, AA or NA group)
- Clergy, staff or lay leadership potentially facing criminal or civil charges
- Criminal activity that damages church property.

This plan will allow the clergy and lay leadership of _____ United Methodist Church to:

- ❖ Provide compassion, concern and care for the victims of the crisis and those impacted by the crisis;
- ❖ Provide means for meeting the needs of media covering the crisis;
- ❖ Provide and enhance a positive image of _____ United Methodist Church.

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The Crisis Communications Team

Permanent Members and Roles:

Pastor

- Manages and directs the Crisis Communications Response Team (*Note: If the church has a director of communications on staff, that person should fill this role.*)
- Serves as the designated spokesperson to respond to *all* media queries during the crisis.

A Lay Leader (*examples: Staff/Pastor/Parish Relations Chair or Lay Leader or administrative Council chair or another lay leader who is recognized and respected*)

- Provides key link between the pastor and the congregation
- Assists in gathering information about the crisis and background information
- *May* be the designated *back-up* spokesperson in the event the pastor is unable or unavailable to fill the role

Pastor's Administrative Assistant

- Links to and directs the work of other support staff (employed or volunteers during the crisis)
- Monitors the logging of all telephone calls and other contacts from media during the crisis
- Duplicates previously prepared Fact Sheet on the church for distribution to the media
- Makes assignments for monitoring media coverage (*clipping newspaper articles, taping radio and television newscasts*)

District Superintendent

- Provides information and consultation
- *May* be the designated *back-up* spokesperson in the event the pastor is unable or unavailable to fill the role

Expanded Team (*specific members depend on the nature of the crisis*)

Additional Lay Leadership (*examples: trustee chair, staff/pastor/parish relations chair, youth group leader, Christian education chair, finance committee chair*)

Pastoral Ministry Staff

Program Ministry Staff

Administrative Ministry Staff

Annual Conference Director of Communications (*for consultation in working with the media and providing information to the congregation and the rest of the conference*)

Attorney (*to provide information concerning the legal process; to advise, but not to determine, what spokesperson will say*)

Conference Chancellor (Attorney) (*to provide information concerning the church's legal process and to advise as to what details of the process can be released to the media*)

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Public Relations Consultant (to provide guidance in the development of statements to the media and preparation for interviews)

Other People, as appropriate

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Implementing the Crisis Communications Plan

Anyone may activate the Crisis Communications Plan when (s)he becomes aware of an actual or potential crisis. The team can be activated by contacting any member of the Permanent Team or Expanded Team. **All members of the teams are responsible for activating the Permanent Team when they learn of an actual or pending crisis. The Permanent Team will determine the initial response.**

If you learn of the crisis from the media:

- 1. Person receiving the call politely but firmly declines to answer the reporter's questions with the "Hold Response" and takes a message including:**
 - Reporter's name
 - Reporter's telephone number
 - Media outlet
 - Reporter's deadline
 - Information the reporter is seeking (*also note what information the reporter already has—correct as well as incorrect information*)
 - Time and date of the call
- 2. Immediately activate the Permanent Team.**
- 3. Contact the designated spokesperson or back-up and give them the information gathered from the reporter.**
 - If you are unable to arrange for someone to return the call by the reporter's deadline, call the reporter and let him/her know you are still working to have someone return the call that can respond to the questions. **DO NOT RESPOND to the questions yourself.**
- 4. Spokesperson or designee notifies district superintendent of crisis and provides available information.**
- 5. The spokesperson or another designated member of the Permanent Team conducts a face-to-face or telephone meeting, following the agenda for "The-First-90-Minutes Meeting."**
- 6. 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.**
- 7. Simultaneously with Step 6, the lay leader alerts other key leaders in the church and/or community to the crisis.**
- 8. The administrative assistant makes assignments for monitoring media coverage of the crisis.**
- 9. The Crisis Communications Team meets as needed to strategize the continuing response.**
- 10. When the crisis is over, the Crisis Communications Team meets to evaluate management procedures and strategy and to make revisions.**

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

1. **Team member learning of the crisis gathers the Crisis Communications Team in person and/or by telephone.** Spokesperson or designee makes assignments for fact-gathering and sets a report time.
2. **Spokesperson or designee notifies the district superintendent of the crisis or pending crisis and provides known information.**
3. **The Expanded Crisis Communications Team meets to assess the facts of the crisis and the first response.** It follows the agenda for "The-First-90-Minutes Meeting." The Team determines if the church should be proactive in releasing a statement about the crisis to the media.
4. **The spokesperson or designee responds to media contacts as received.**
5. **When the crisis is over, the Crisis Communications Team meets to evaluate response procedures and strategy and to make revisions to the plan.**

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"The First 90 Minutes" Meeting

"The First 90 Minutes" are critical in managing the communications tasks that virtually explode when a crisis occurs or is pending.

When you learn of a crisis through a contact with a reporter—not an unusual occurrence—you have approximately 90 minutes to make your first formal response. If you learn of the crisis from another source, you can anticipate a call within the next 90 minutes, although it may be sooner or hours or days later.

This is the agenda for the first meeting of the permanent or expanded Crisis Communications Team in a local church. This meeting may be face-to-face or by telephone, or a combination of the two.

1. **Opening Prayer** for all those impacted by the crisis and for guidance and wisdom as the church moves through the crisis and the days and weeks following.
2. **Statement to group as to what has happened or will happen**
3. **Identification of:**
 - Direct and indirect victims of the crisis
 - Confirmed facts
 - Unconfirmed information
 - Other needed information
 - Who else needs to be a part of the Expanded Crisis Communications Team
 - Who else in the congregation needs to be informed *immediately*
 - Who in the community needs to be informed *immediately*
4. **Assign task of gathering information to confirm or discount unconfirmed information and other needed information.** If possible, have someone other than one of the Crisis Communications Team members do this, so the information can be gathered while the meeting proceeds.
5. **Determine what information needs to be released *immediately* to others in the congregation and community** and assign a person to begin doing this.
6. **Determine if sufficient interest potentially exists to require a "staging area"** for news media at the church or the site of the crisis.
7. **Determine what information *can* and *will* be released in the first response to news media calls.**
8. **Develop the statement the spokesperson will use in response to the initial contacts from the media.** This may be a formal or informal statement. The key is that the same basic information is given to all media contacts in the initial conversation.
9. **Determine what, if any, information beyond the statement can be released** to the news media at this time.
10. **Identify questions reporters are likely to ask and responses.** (If possible, have the conference director of communications assist you—in person or by telephone—to identify your media response).
11. **Determine what questions must be referred to other sources** (For example, "Was the driver of the van involved in the accident speeding?" or "Did the person accused of starting the

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fire have a criminal record?” should be referred to law enforcement, fire or public safety officials.)

- 12. Determine what response the spokesperson will give to questions that cannot be answered at that time** either because information is not available or because the information cannot be released.
- 13. Review assignments and roles** as the management of communications surrounding the crisis begins.
- 14. Set the next meeting of the Crisis Communications Management Team.**
- 15. Pray.**

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Media Procedures for Church Staff

Handling Telephone Calls from Reporters

- Take a written message (don't transfer to voicemail without taking message)
- Get reporter's name, media outlet, direct phone #, and deadline
- Ask for topic of story
- Explain that church spokesperson will return call
- Don't answer questions yourself
- Be polite, but firm
- Keep a log or written record of media calls

"Hold Response"

"I want to make sure we give you the most accurate and up-to-date information. Our (*conference communicator*) 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."

Handling Reporters On-Site

- Refer questions to pastor, conference communicator or district superintendent
- Don't be hostile
- Don't give your personal opinion
- Don't speak "off the record"
- Don't use the term "no comment"
- Be polite, but firm

Handling Casual Conversations or Questions about a Crisis

- Don't speculate, repeat unconfirmed information or express personal opinions
- Don't feel like you have to answer questions
- Do respond with a brief, positive, general statement

Primary Contact:

Office # _____ Mobile / Pager # _____

Crisis Communications Plan Telephone Log for Media Calls

1. Duplicate this sheet, so a new page is available for logging *every* media call related to the crisis.
2. **Every** call from the media related to the crisis is to be logged using one of these sheets. An electronic log may also be used, but it is recommended that a paper log be maintained for the convenience of those returning calls.
3. Copy the completed log sheet before giving it to the spokesperson, and place it in a file to be maintained throughout the crisis.
4. Complete this log before transferring the call to spokesperson or designee.
5. *Never transfer a call to voicemail without completing this log.*
6. Remember, do not answer the reporter's questions yourself, but decline *politely* and refer the reporter to the spokesperson.

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Crisis Communications Plan Telephone Log for Media Calls

Name/Location of person taking message _____

Date of Call _____ Time of Call _____

Reporter's Name _____

Media Outlet _____

Telephone Number _____

Reporter's Deadline _____

What information does the reporter want? _____

What information does the reporter already have? _____

Other Notes: _____

Person to Whom the Reporter Was Referred: _____

Guidelines for Handling Media On-Site

When The United Methodist Church is involved in a crisis, the media will often show-up at a church, youth camp or conference office. Here are guidelines for handling media on-site:

- **Identify a location where reporters and photographers park vehicles and stand while they're covering the story.** You want to identify a place that allows privacy for the church and 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.
- **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.
- **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."*
- **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.
- **As far as the law is concerned,** a photographer can take pictures of any people or things as long as s/he 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 him/her to leave your property, that photographer should leave immediately. You should be aware of local laws regulating demonstrations near church property.
- **Be proactive.** If you see a photographer and/or reporter interviewing people or taking photographs/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.
- **Establish an Interview Location**

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What to Say When You Speak to the Media

[If time permits, we recommend that you contact the Conference Director of Communications for immediate consultation and advice before speaking to the media.]

1. Begin with a statement (it's okay to repeat parts of your statement & main points later)
2. Use confirmed facts only—try to include the basics of what happened and what the church is doing to respond. Don't give names of victims.
3. Express concern and compassion when appropriate
4. Keep the statement short and simple
5. Refer to policies and procedures when you can't discuss specifics.
6. Don't guess, speculate or speak outside of your expertise. It's okay to say, "I don't know. I can check on that."
7. Speak slowly, naturally and confidently. It's okay to pause between key points.
8. 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.
9. If you don't understand a reporter's question, ask the reporter to repeat or clarify the question. Again, it's okay to pause before answering.
10. Conclude the briefing when you've given all of 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. I need to return to managing the situation and taking care of the people involved. We will update you in *(fill-in the blank)*. Please give me your business card with a fax or e-mail address so we can provide you with updated information when it's available. Our office # is *(fill-in)*."
11. *If you have a written statement and/or photographs, you can say "I have typed copies of our statement available for you, along with background information about the church/conference," and, if available, "I have a photograph that you can scan—I need to keep the original."*
12. 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 e-mail or fax additional information to the media instead of holding another briefing. If possible, make any news releases or written information available on your website.