

West Ohio Conference

Crisis Communications

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Table of Contents

Quick Sheet: What to Do When a Crisis Occurs.....	2
Overview of Crisis Communications.....	3
Team Members, Roles and Responsibilities	4
Crisis Communications Process Flow Chart	5
Description of Crisis Communications Process	6
Crisis Communications Team Contact List	9
Supplemental Information:	
Information Disclosure Guidelines	10
Sample Team Meeting Agenda.....	11
Sample Crisis Situation Report	12
Media Log Sheet	14
Post Crisis Review Sheet.....	15
How to respond to media	17

Quick Sheet: What to Do When a Crisis Occurs

Contact a Core Team Member

Immediately contact either of these members of the Core Team, Barb Sholis, Assistant to the Bishop or Lisa Streight, Director of Communications, to advise the conference of the crisis.

Rev. Barbara Sholis, Assistant to the Bishop	bsholis@wocumc.org	614-844-6200x227 (w)
Ms. Lisa Streight, Director of Communications	lstreight@wocumc.org	614-844-6200 x229 (w)

The Core Team member you contacted will contact other members of the Core Team as appropriate and assess the level of the crisis and whether the Crisis Communications Team needs to be activated.

Conference Management of a Crisis:

If a pastor is involved, at fault or potentially liable for the crisis or the situation has the potential for legal liability for the conference, the Crisis Team will be activated and primary communications and leadership for managing the crisis will be at the conference level.

The Conference Crisis Communications Team will work with the superintendent of the district involved and local church pastor to gather information about the crisis. A conference level person will become the spokesperson and all communications will be managed by and come from the Crisis Communication Team.

The local church and district offices will be advised on how to handle media inquiries to direct them to the conference office.

Church or District Management of a Crisis:

If it is determined by the Core Team that this is a local church crisis best handled by the district office and local church, the Crisis Team will not be activated.

In the case of the crisis being managed on the district and local level, the Director of Communications is available to assist in managing communications efforts in the following way:

- a. Working with the pastor to assess the situation, develop initial statements, train staff on how to handle media contacts
- b. Develop talking points for the spokesperson and coaching the spokesperson on talking with the media
- c. Prepare communications to congregations or constituents concerning the crisis

Overview of Crisis Communications

What is Crisis Communications?

Crisis communications is primarily **managing the media and legal issues** during any crisis situation which may potentially damage the reputation of The United Methodist Church in West Ohio. Most crises happen in the local church. The conference Crisis Communication Team becomes involved when the crisis involves clergy, or when there is potential for legal liability for the conference.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this document, a “Crisis” has a broad definition.

- A situation that puts the church, district or conference’s *values* on trial in the court of public opinion.
- A situation that requires immediate attention & may attract the attention of the media and/or public.
- A situation that calls attention to a divide in the denomination, conference or local church that could undermine the effectiveness of the conference.

District Managed Crisis

For **churches and district offices**, potential crisis situations can range from improper use of donated funds by a local church to the injury or death of a participant during a church sponsored event or program.

Conference Managed Crisis

For the **conference**, a crisis involves a person under appointment and includes such situations as inappropriate behavior or misuse of funds by clergy.

Purpose of a Conference Crisis Communications Plan

The purpose of this Crisis Communications Plan is to manage internal and external communications during a crisis situation related to The United Methodist Church in the West Ohio Conference. The plan provides the steps involved in managing a crisis communications process, including:

- roles and responsibilities of the Conference Crisis Communications Team;
- risk management and legal issues;
- internal reporting procedures;
- messaging and dealing with the media and public; and
- communication flow to key staff or volunteers, constituents and the news media.

Strict adherence to this plan’s structures, policies and procedures will enable the West Ohio Conference to respond to crisis situations in an efficient and timely manner, thus helping to minimize their potential impact. A well-practiced Crisis Communications Plan allows conference leaders to:

- gather the pertinent facts, quickly assess the situation and respond to key audiences in an open and honest manner;
- enact the necessary measures to swiftly address the situation without jeopardizing the integrity and safety of staff, volunteers and constituents;
- uphold the West Ohio Conference of The United Methodist Church’s values, reputation and mission statement.
- provide compassion, concern and care for the victims of the crisis and for those affected by the crisis;
- meet the needs of the media covering the crisis;
- project a positive image for the conference and The United Methodist Church.

What this Plan Does NOT Do

This plan is *NOT* designed to manage a crisis such as a natural disaster, but needs to be integrated into the overall crisis management plan for such a disaster. Neither does it replace the responsibilities of the Response Team in sexual misconduct cases.

Roles and Responsibilities of Team Members

- **Bishop**
 - Provide leadership when crisis team is enacted
 - Communicate with key people in the community and other United Methodist Agencies as appropriate
 - Review both internal and media reports on crisis

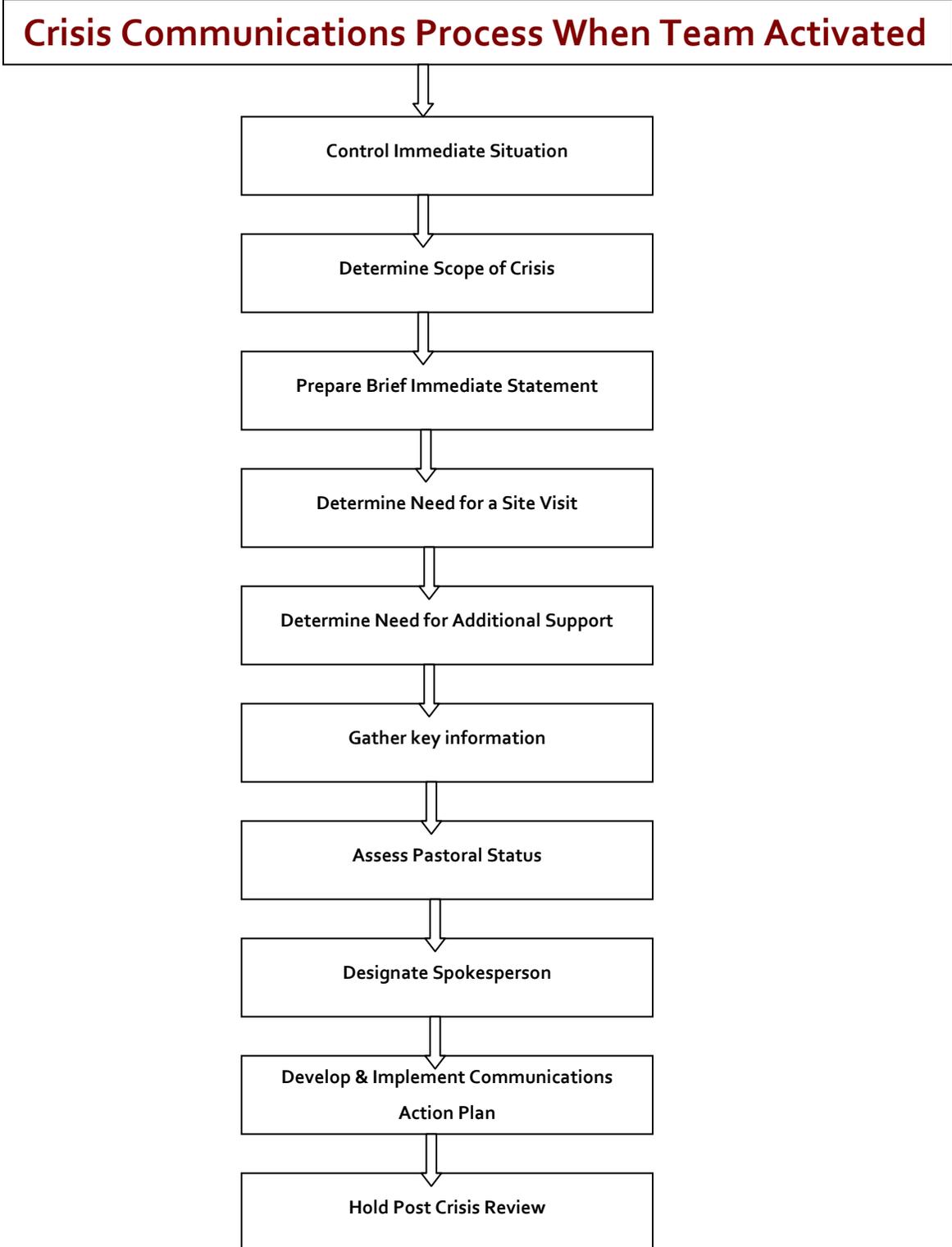
- **Assistant to the Bishop**
 - Review crisis situation with Director of Communications and determine if crisis team should be enacted
 - Assign duties to members of Crisis Communications Team
 - Approve media statements and release of other information
 - Review both internal and media reports on crisis

- **Director of Communications**
 - Review crisis situation with Assistant to the Bishop and determine if crisis team should be enacted
 - Develop immediate brief statement
 - Gather verbatim facts and information about the crisis from pastor
 - Develop both internal and external communications statements
 - Monitor and report media activity to team
 - Handle inquiries from the media
 - Serve as spokesperson or coach the spokesperson prior to media interviews
 - Direct and coach support staff on how to handle calls during the crisis
 - Advise pastor on communications needed

- **Conference Chancellor**
 - Review crisis situation with Assistant to the Bishop and determine if legal issues exist
 - Advise conference on legal strategies
 - Review public communications for potential liability

- **Superintendent of district where crisis occurred.**
 - Update crisis team on key information about the crisis
 - Provide pastoral support for pastor, leaders and congregation

- **Other Team Members at the discretion of the Bishop or Assistant to the Bishop**
 - Dean of Cabinet
 - District lawyers
 - Executive Team Members
 - Other persons as deemed appropriate



Process When a Crisis Occurs

1. Determine if Crisis Communications Team Should be Activated

- a. Alert the Assistant to the Bishop or Director of Communications of potential crisis.
- b. Assistant to the Bishop and Director of Communications will determine if crisis team should be activated.
- c. Bishop and Chancellor will be notified of crisis as appropriate for situation
- d. If Crisis Team not activated, Director of Communications may continue to work with district office and/or local church to advise them on managing communications for crisis.
- e. If Crisis Team is activated, continue with step 2 of Crisis Process

2. Activate the Crisis Communications Team

- a. Bishop, Assistant to the Bishop, Director of Communications and Chancellor determine who beyond core team will be involved.
- b. Director of Communications notifies crisis team members of activation of team and when first meeting or conference call will be held to update team.

3. Control Immediate Situation

- a. "The First 90 Minutes" are critical in managing the communications tasks that virtually explode when a crisis breaks or is pending.
- b. This step will be hopefully handled by either someone on the Conference Crisis Communications Team, or if they have not been activated yet, by someone of leadership who has received crisis training.
- c. If the crisis involves something that's occurred at a church facility or if reporters are already at a church facility, the staff or persons at that location should be instructed to follow the guidelines outlined in "Media Procedures for Church and Conference Staff" "Handling Media On-Site." This includes using the "hold response" outlined in those documents.
- d. Staff and volunteers should use the "Telephone Log" to take messages and record information about media inquiries.
- e. Make sure there are adequate staff members or volunteers at the location of the crisis to handle incoming telephone calls and restrict access to church facilities or property.
- f. If there are calls or inquiries from the general public or persons not immediately involved in the crisis, staff members and volunteers should respond by saying something like:
"We appreciate your concern. We're assessing the situation right now, so I don't have any confirmed information for you at this time. Thank you for your call."

4. Determine the Scope of the Crisis

- a. What is known and not known about the situation?
- b. Who knows about the situation? What do they know?
- c. What is likely to happen in the next couple hours?
- d. What information can and should be released to the media and public immediately, if any?
- e. Other questions to consider:
 - Does the situation affect the health and safety of anyone?
 - Is the reputation of the Church at risk?
 - Have we received calls from reporters? If not, is the media likely to be interested?
 - Do there appear to be any violation of local, state or federal law?
 - Is there a possibility of wrongdoing or negligence?

5. **Prepare a Brief Immediate Statement, Ready to Use if Needed**
 - a. Given to reporters if needed for immediate statement
 - b. Very brief, confirmed facts about what happened
 - c. Explanation of church's response
 - d. Expression of care and concern for any victims

6. **Determine if a Site Visit is Needed and if so, by Whom**
 - a. Should a trained spokesperson and/or other member of the team leave immediately for the location of the crisis, such as a church building or church camp? You'll want to consider several factors before dispatching a team member, such as:
 - i. Are reporters already at the location or likely to arrive soon?
 - ii. Is anyone at the location (i.e. camp director or pastor) prepared to handle media interviews?
 - iii. How much time will it take to travel to the location?
 - iv. Is this a serious crisis with the potential to attract significant media attention over a period of several days?

7. **Determine if Additional Support is Needed**
 - a. Determine if additional people need to be consulted who might have key insights into the management or potential risks of crisis.

8. **Gather Key Information**
 - a. Director of Communications speaks with pastor and creates a verbatim report describing situation
 - b. A Situation Report is generated for updating the Crisis Team.
 - c. Included are known facts of the situation, persons involved, dates, times, etc. for help in assembling a total picture of the crisis.
 - d. This report will be added to and referred to as the situation develops and additional information is known.

9. **Assess Pastoral Status**
 - a. Is there any immediate action needed to the pastor's status with the local church and conference
 - b. After the crisis can the pastor return to the appointment?
 - c. Will the pastor ever return to an appointment?
 - d. What are the repercussions for local church and the conference if the pastor's status changes?

10. **Designate a Spokesperson**
 - a. A spokesperson should be designated who will handle media interviews.
 - b. Choose the spokesperson based on knowledge/expertise relating to the crisis, image that will be portrayed to the public, ability to handle media questions.
 - c. The spokesperson should receive coaching before giving any interviews.

11. Develop a Communications Strategy or Action Plan

- a. Give priority to:
 - i. Protecting the safety of staff, volunteers, congregation and others
 - ii. Preserving the reputation of The United Methodist Church and the conference
 - iii. Acting in accordance with the highest ethical principles
 - iv. Demonstrating sensitivity to the emotional impact of the crisis on affected individuals or groups
 - v. Complying with local, state and federal laws, as well as church policies

- b. Included should be:
 - i. A strategy to communicate information internally to leaders and externally to constituents or other audiences
 - ii. A strategy to communicate information to the news media
 - iii. How much and what kind of information to release
 - iv. When to release information
 - v. How to release information (i.e., written statement, interview, news conference) and to whom (i.e., only reporters who've called for information or additional outlets on the conference media list)
 - vi. Where the spokesperson will talk to media
 - vii. An official written statement and "talking points" for the spokesperson to use when speaking to reporters.

12. Post-Crisis Review

- a. Once a crisis has been resolved, the Crisis Communications Team should compile a crisis summary report. The report will detail key learning, including:
 - i. Cause of the crisis;
 - ii. Extent and tone of media coverage;
 - iii. Improvements in the crisis response process and how to implement those improvements; and
 - iv. Possible alterations to conference policy and procedures.

Team Contact List

ROLE	MEMBER NAME	EMAIL	CELL/OFFICE
Core Team	Bishop Gregory V. Palmer	wocbishop@wocumc.org	614-844-6200 (w)
Core Team	Rev. Barbara Sholis, Assistant to the Bishop	bsholis@wocumc.org	614-844-6200x227 (w)
Core Team	Ms. Lisa Streight, Director of Communications	lstreight@wocumc.org	614-844-6200 x229 (w)
Core Team	Mr. Phil Moots, Conference Chancellor		
Core Team	Superintendent of District Where Crisis Occurred		
Other Potential Team Members as Designated by the Bishop:			
Spokesperson	If other than Director of Communications		
CFO/Director of Administration	Mr. Bill Brownson	bbrownson@wocumc.org	614-844-6200 x221 (w)
Director Connectional Ministries	Rev. Dee Stickley-Miner	dstickley@wocumc.org	614-844-6200 x239 (w)
Director of Office of Ministry	Rev. Wade Giffin	wgiffin@wocumc.org	614-844-6200 x316 (w)
Director of Council on Development	Rev. George Cooper	gcooper@wocumc.org	614-844-6200 x212 (w)
Dean of the Cabinet	Rev. Marcus Atha	matha@wocumc.org	614-222-0602 (w)
DS – Capitol Area North	Rev. Marcus Atha	matha@wocumc.org	614-222-0602 (w)
DS – Capitol Area South	Rev. Kathleen Brown	kbrown@wocumc.org	614-222-0600 (w)
DS – Foothills	Rev. Dennis Miller	dmiller@wocumc.org	888-868-1225 (w)
DS – Maumee Watershed	Rev. Linda Middelberg	lmiddelberg@wocumc.org	419-897-9770 (w)
DS – Miami Valley	Rev. Jocelyn Roper	jroper@wocumc.org	937-529-2320 (w)
DS – Northwest Plains	Rev. Barry Burns	bburns@wocumc.org	419-523-9901 (w)
DS – Ohio River Valley	Rev. Brian Brown	bbrown@wocumc.org	513-421-2057 (w)
DS – Shawnee Valley	Rev. Brent Watson	bwatson@wocumc.org	740-851-5243 (w)
Potentially included in communications:			
Bishop's Secretary	Ms. Karen Corbitt	kcorbitt@wocumc.org	614-844-6200x215 (w)
Conference Receptionist	Mrs. Peggy Smith	psmith@wocumc.org	614-844-6200 (w)
District Receptionist			
Church Receptionist			

Supplemental Information

Information Disclosure Guidelines

In the midst of a crisis, it's a challenge to determine what information is appropriate to release to the news media. Remember that reporters have many sources of information. If you say "no comment," they won't drop the story, they'll just go to someone else for details and that person may be uninformed or provide false information. You want to establish the Church as a credible and accurate source of information for the media and public.

1. The leader of the Conference Crisis Communications Team will approve media statements and information for the spokesperson to release to the media and public. If the Bishop is not available, then the Assistant to the Bishop will approve disclosure of information.
2. The Conference Crisis Communications Team is the "single source of information." Only the Crisis Communications Team is authorized to disclose information through a designated spokesperson. Individual staff members or clergy are not authorized to provide information to the media.
3. The spokesperson will provide confirmed, factual information only.
4. The spokesperson will never release names of victims before the next of kin have been notified. It's best to coordinate with law enforcement.
5. Standard policy for disclosing information about staff is to confirm that a person is/was an employee and to provide the person's job title and dates of employment. Details of an employee's personnel record or job application are almost NEVER disclosed to the media or public.
6. Information that's typically NOT included is speculation about dollar value of losses, causes of the crisis and ball-park estimates of any kind.
7. The Crisis Communications Team may provide photographs to the media. For example, a photograph of a clergy member who has been killed or injured may be released with the permission of the family.

Sample Crisis Communications Team Meeting Agenda

When the Crisis Team Leader has assembled the Crisis Communications Team, the following specific agenda items should be covered or decided by the Team:

- A. Declare type/level of crisis situation
- B. Situation Report:
 - a. What appears to have happened?
 - b. Confirm facts (distribution and review of crisis fact sheet)
 - c. Scope of proposed situation
- C. Initial Response Status
 - a. What is being done, why, by whom?
 - b. Likely implementation time and hoped-for results
- D. Initial Communications Status
 - a. Who knows, who needs to know immediately and who can be briefed later
 - b. Alert receptionist, district offices, cabinet, executive team, conference staff
- E. Short-term Response Requirements
 - a. Appoint the Spokesperson
 - b. Assign Crisis Communications Team responsibilities
 - c. Determine what must be done in the next several hours and how
 - d. Determine what human and material resources are available or needed
- F. Short-term Communications Process
 - a. Constituents and media
- G. Duration of Crisis Communications Team Meeting
 - a. Continue meeting? Who needs to attend? Back-ups?
 - b. Next meeting time

Sample Crisis Situation Report

The Communications Director should complete this sheet and speak to the appropriate parties to find out the most complete answers possible. These forms should be kept confidential and not released to the media or by any party involved in the incident.

Date & Time of First Report _____

Who is the person reporting the situation (name and contact information) and how is the person involved with The United Methodist Church?

What numbers (office extension, home, mobile phone and pager) can the person reporting the situation be reached at if more information is needed?

What happened? _____

Where did it happen? _____

When did it happen (include date and time)? _____

Was there any damage, injuries or fatalities? Explain in detail. _____

Crisis Communications

Revised July 2013

Who else was involved or present (names and contact information)?

What actions have already been taken? _____

Has anyone else been notified? If so, who was contacted?

Has there been any media attention? If so, what outlet(s) (e.g., television, radio, newspaper, magazine, Internet)? Cite specific media alerted.

Other comments? _____

Media Log Sheet

Crisis Situation _____

Date _____ Office _____

Message for _____

Date/time of call _____

Caller _____

Phone number(s) _____

Media outlet/Name _____

Return call by/Deadline _____

Summary of inquiry _____

Who responded to the inquiry? _____

Date/Time _____

Summary of response _____

Further action needed? _____

Post-Crisis Review Sheet

What areas of the crisis response process do you think were handled extremely well?

What areas of the crisis response process could have been handled better?

What adjustments need to be made to conference policy and procedures to avert future crisis situations?

Other thoughts or comments? _____

Crisis Communications

Revised July 2013

West Ohio Conference



What action steps were taken to resolve the crisis situation? _____

Was the crisis response timely? Why or why not? _____

Was the spokesperson effective? _____

Was the press release or statement used by the media? _____

How do you think the crisis response process was handled? _____

Media Procedures for Church, District and Conference 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 Responses'

Telephone:

"I want to make sure we give you the most accurate and up-to-date information. Our spokesperson _____ (*appropriate person*) can best help you. If you give me your contact information, deadline and topic that you're calling about, I'll pass along your message to our spokesperson."

On-site with emerging situation:

"Our job right now is to keep everyone safe. We understand that the media have a job to do. We're gathering information and our spokesperson will respond."

Handling Reporters On-site

- You can say no to a request for an interview from media who appear on-site
- Refer questions to pastor, conference spokesperson or district superintendent as appropriate
- 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
- Refer the person to the designated spokesperson for information
- Do respond with a brief, positive, general statement

Contact information for West Ohio Conference Spokesperson, Lisa Streight:
Office # 614/844-6200 or 800/437-0028 Email: lstreight@wocumc.org