

## YOUR CHURCH'S CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN: WHAT TO INCLUDE

Every organization – including churches – needs to be prepared for a crisis situation. Having a developed plan ahead of time will help everyone – church leaders, all internal audiences, and all external audiences including the media (if they are involved) – work through the situation in the most positive and encouraging manner possible.

Here are suggested items that your church's crisis communications plan may include to ensure your church leaders are as ready as possible for a variety of crisis situations that may impact your church.

### A CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN CHECKLIST FOR YOUR CHURCH

#### ■ Overview/introduction within the crisis communications plan

Identify the purpose and goals of your church's crisis communications plan. Answer questions such as:

- Why does it exist? What purpose does it serve?
- What are your overall goals for communicating during a crisis situation?
- Who will benefit from this plan? (Spoiler alert: All impacted groups and audiences are served when your church has a plan for communicating well in a crisis situation.)
- Who developed the plan and when?
- Who will oversee and continue to review and enhance this plan moving forward?

#### ■ Identify your church's crisis communications team

This is the team that executes the crisis communications plan. The team should be made up of executive/senior level church leaders and the communications director/team. Other staff and lay leaders may be involved as well.

#### ■ Identify the situations your church may face

Identify potential issues/situations that could create a crisis and become highly visible for your church. Organize or group these situations (by level/severity of the situation or kind of issue – weather related, internal, external, etc.).

## ■ Give guidelines about when to implement the plan

Managing difficult situations and openly communicating to all key audiences is an ideal goal to have. The crisis communications team should be ready to act and communicate swiftly and intentionally.

When situations arise, use the questions/information in this section to determine if and when your crisis communications plan should be implemented.

- What is the situation?
- What is known?
- What do we anticipate will happen next?
- Who is involved? (Make a complete list of impacted audiences.)
- Who knows this information? (Again, make a complete list of audiences.)
- Who needs to know this information? (Again, make a complete list of audiences.)
- Is there public/media interest? Do we anticipate public/media interest? Locally? Regionally? Nationally? Online?
- What are people feeling? What emotions should be considered?
- What next steps do we need to help our audiences take?

## ■ Identify responsibilities in a crisis

Throughout a challenging situation, many people may be involved to ensure that key areas and people are safe, being communicated with and understand what next steps are needed.

Clearly identifying who is responsible for what in a crisis plan is essential. Consider these key areas:

- **Safety** – who needs to be notified or involved immediately to ensure safety of all people and your facility/the location?
- **Organizing internally** – who needs to be notified and/or involved immediately? (Crisis communications team, etc.)

Continued organization internally will involve working through these items, as quickly as the situation calls for:

1. With the crisis communications team, determine:
  - What is the situation?
  - What is known?
  - What do we anticipate will happen next?
  - Who is involved? (Make a complete list of impacted audiences.)
  - Who knows this information? (Again, make a complete list of audiences.)
  - Who needs to know this information? (Again, make a complete list of audiences.)
  - Is there public/media interest? Do we anticipate public/media interest? Locally? Regionally? Nationally? Online?
  - What are people feeling? What emotions should be considered?
  - What next steps do we need to help our audiences take?

2. Determine who will be the crisis communications lead organizer who will oversee all details related to carrying out this crisis plan and serve as the main contact for media. Often, this will be the communications director. Or, these roles could be filled by two people, if needed. Ensure leadership/staff know to direct all media inquiries to the crisis communications lead organizer or lead media contact.

Provide a Media Request Form to all staff (to use during a time of crisis or not). This can be a simple form where they can document who called, when and the reason for their call. This form should be completed and the information provided to the communications director immediately any time a media outlet contacts the church.

3. Determine who will be the spokesperson for this situation. Who is available and can speak clearly and compassionately with both internal and external/media audiences?

4. Continue assessing the situation, updating the facts and determining needs.

5. Determine the timeline and appropriate actions for dealing with the situation, correcting the situation and communicating about the situation (both internally and externally, if needed).

6. Develop, fact check, approve, finalize and distribute initial statements/media materials. Depending on the situation, a variety of communications materials and tools could be used to disseminate these important messages. As much as possible, get specific within the crisis communications plan about what communication mediums are preferred in the various situations. Updated information should be available on the church's website as well.

7. Develop and provide key messages or a script to the key spokesperson, receptionist/anyone responding to phone calls or online and others who will need to interact with either internal or external audiences about the crisis.

- **Communicating with all key audiences in a timely manner**

For a church, the key audiences will often include:

1. leadership/staff
2. congregation/other key internal audiences
3. media contacts/other key external audiences, if needed

Your communications to these audiences should provide factual information as quickly as possible (typically within 24 hours or less if the situation is urgent) and give updates about the crisis (what happened), the church's response, and information about important next steps. The tone should be as compassionate, positive and action-oriented (toward help and resolution) as possible.

- **Ongoing communications**

1. Determine what additional communications pieces or resources are needed to answer questions (on-site, on the church's website, through social media, voicemail messages, etc.).
2. Partner with staff/church leaders to work through the crisis situation, as needed, with other staff, other church leaders, and all key audiences. 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 key with any follow-up/evaluation.

- **Evaluation** - Be intentional to evaluate your church'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.

### ■ Contact information

Ensure the crisis communications team/other key leaders have updated contact information (work/home/mobile) for all key staff. Suggest an order in which people should be contacted in a crisis.

### ■ Sample communications materials

Have templates ready that could be quickly customized and used as communications materials in a crisis situation. Consider these materials:

- Sample media statement (brief statement)
- Sample news release (longer document, when more details or explanation needs to be given)
- Sample Q&A info sheet
- Sample key messages or script for talking with the congregation/any key audience
- Sample email or eNews template ready for talking with internal or external audiences