

# COMMUNICATING AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

★ The **Episcopal Diocese of Texas** *of Texas*

## WHAT IS A CRISIS?



“A stage at which all future events affecting a person or organization will be determined. It is a major turning point resulting in permanent drastic change. It is far more crucial than most emergencies.”

– Philip Lesly

“A significant business disruption which stimulates extensive news media coverage.

The resulting public scrutiny affects the organization's normal operations and also could have a political, legal, financial and governmental impact on its business.”

– Inst. for C.M.

“A situation that puts your organization's values on trial in the court of public opinion.”

– Wm. Curry



In times of crisis, you will likely see the soul of your organization, as well your own, exposed for better or for worse. You'll see, sometimes suddenly, weaknesses that need attention both in yourself and your organization. And you'll lay awake nights searching for strengths and strategizing about how you can build upon them. A crisis can be a fire, an accident, a crime or a natural disaster. Each will have somewhat different aspects of response. The best time to plan for a crisis is before you have one.

### COMMON COMPONENTS OF CRISES

1. They arise suddenly.
2. Information and key leaders are not always available when you need them.
3. Every crisis provides its own opportunity to position your organization in the way it wants to be understood. This opportunity comes very early in the game.
4. All crises tend to impair judgment and clear thinking.

### LIFE CYCLE OF A CRISIS

The typical life cycle of a crisis begins with the event, quickly moves to investigative coverage and eventually to blame-assignment, public reaction, reminders and disinterest. Your objective is to get from the event to disinterest as quickly as possible. The longer that full and complete facts are not forthcoming, the longer the situation continues to be unresolved, the longer the crisis will be kept alive. The longer the crisis lives, the more damage that will be done.

# EVALUATION

## Evaluate Your Crisis Management Readiness

- |  |     |    |
|--|-----|----|
| 1. We have a written crisis management plan.   | yes | no |
| We update it annually and every time personnel changes.  | yes | no |
| We have tested it to be sure it works.   | yes | no |
| 2. We know who our spokesperson(s) would be.   | yes | no |
| We have an alternate spokesperson.   | yes | no |
| He/she knows how to handle difficult questions from the media.   | yes | no |
| He/she are sure they are credible and convincing in a media face-off.  | yes | no |
| A spokesperson is available 24/7.  | yes | no |
| 3. Our crisis management team can be reached during non-business hours.  | yes | no |
| 4. We have prepared an exhaustive list of possible crises and have determined what would be said and by whom.        | yes | no |
| 5. We have a prompt approval plan in place to handle sensitive information during a crisis.                          | yes | no |
| 6. We have a procedure in place to inform clergy and lay leadership about crises before they hear it from the media. | yes | no |
| 7. We have learned from crises we've experienced as well as those experienced by other faith traditions.             | yes | no |
| We know what crises cost in time, resources and reputation.  | yes | no |
| We know what we would do differently for better outcomes.  | yes | no |

## Name Your Crisis Management Team

### PERMANENT BASIC TEAM:

Rector or head of congregation, sr. warden, and one or two other congregational leaders (if church). One should be the designated spokesperson.

Expanded Diocesan Team might include as needed:

Bishop, Communication director, canon to the ordinary, legal counsel, financial officer, archdeacon, dean or other regional administrator, communications committee, representative from a public relations firm or media professional and other support personnel as required.

Whoever comprises your team should be available 24 hours a day during the entire life cycle of the crisis by cell phone, email and in person.

Do not assume team members know their responsibilities. Make specific assignments. Prepare a list of duties and actions expected of each team member. Make sure every member of the team understands who is responsible for what. Establish a clear chain of command and an agreed-upon approval process for action and the dissemination of information.

In the case of Hurricane Harvey, the Diocese established a regular phone call with affected clergy beginning immediately after the event. This is a list of the duties as may be assigned for a diocesan crisis:

The bishop

1. Assembles the team and sets the plan in motion when a crisis occurs
2. Assists in anticipating the intermediate and long-range impact of the crisis
3. Provides final decisions based on input from the crisis management team
4. May serve as spokesperson in some situations

The communicator

1. Manages the organization's message - is responsible for crafting a clear, concise, constructive and credible message
2. Often chosen to be the primary spokesperson to inform others of the crisis, including clergy, laity, the general public, the media and others
3. Relates to the media with input from the crisis management team, anticipates and meets the needs of the media
4. Corrects inaccurate or misleading reporting immediately

Canon to the Ordinary or other

1. Works out the logistics of the crisis - screens and logs calls
2. Tracks schedules of all team members - knows how to reach them all at all times
3. May be assigned to keep in touch with family of victim or congregation involved
4. May serve as alternate spokesperson if properly trained

Legal Counsel

1. Provides input on liability and regulatory concerns
2. Reviews all statements and news releases for legal implications

In a church, the rector, sr. warden and head of school (if involved) should represent the core of a response team and meet daily at the same time as the issue develops.

## What Your Crisis Management Plan Should Include

The optimum time within which to respond to a crisis is within the first 90 minutes. The longer you take to respond, the bigger the chance that public opinion will be swayed by others. Having a predetermined plan will enable you to respond quickly. A good plan is characterized by the following standards for response to any crisis:

- Openness, accessibility, availability and willingness to respond
  - Truthfulness, honesty without conditions
  - Responsiveness to all constituencies
  - No secrets - behavior, attitudes, plans, strategic discussions are unchallengeable, unassailable and positive
1. Objectives - clear statements that clarify your response strategies
  2. A list of possible crises that includes scenarios from all of the following categories:
    - Natural disasters
    - Criminal or legal action
    - Violent acts, demonstrations, death or violent injuries
    - Personnel crises
    - Positive crises
    - Perceived crises
  3. Choice of spokesperson(s) and alternate(s)
  4. Staff Assignments
  5. Outline of your decision-making process
  6. Media Guidelines and up-to-date list of phone numbers. Media personnel change frequently so keeping a current list is very helpful.
  7. Prioritized list of various audiences to whom information must be disseminated. Each list should include identified means of communicating with each person on the list (office or cell phone, e-mail, home and office numbers).

Primary list with all contact info for persons who "need to know" immediately. This includes employees/staff. Others are key clergy and lay leaders, and those most directly impacted by the crisis.

Secondary list of those who need to be informed shortly following the initial event. This may include deans, priests, deacons, wardens, national church personnel, Episcopal News Service, etc.

Current media contacts, both print and broadcast, in regional and local media

Other lists might include non-Episcopal clergy in the affected area, public officials (board of health, social services), fire, police, city, county and state emergency management agencies, insurance agents, etc.
  8. Plans for computer backup and storage of files
  9. Plans for informing and training staff about the crisis plan
  10. If necessary: office space. Designate a room for the media response team's use. If needed, how could you provide sufficient cell phone, wi-fi capabilities.
  11. Outline a notification process for family and friends for use when there is loss of life or injury. Name the crisis team member(s) who will keep in touch with them.

12. Media Relations: Assess your current media relations. Do you need to know and make friends with current media personnel? Building a working, trusting relationship rarely occurs in the midst of a crisis.
13. Practice: Your plan should include times when crises are simulated so that the plan can be practiced.
14. Regular meeting: Team should meet to anticipate and discuss possible crises and how they might be avoided or minimized.

## YOUR OFFICIAL STATEMENT

A carefully crafted statement released promptly is your best ally.

Include basic facts and what steps are being taken by your organization. Do not exaggerate or speculate. Be accurate, but don't trivialize or use inflammatory phrases. Say what is necessary, but nothing more. Avoid giving too much personal detail. Avoid church jargon, as it is often confusing to the general public.

Brief the entire staff about the terminology being used.

If a media representative calls, respond to their inquiry quickly, but release the information to all other media ASAP.

## How to be an Effective Spokesperson: Be fast, factual, frank, fair and friendly

1. Respond to inquiries within 90 minutes.
2. Honor deadlines.
3. Do not say anything to a reporter that you do not want to appear in print or be heard on the air.
4. Get to the point. Avoid church jargon. Avoid humor—it is often misinterpreted. Be direct, clear, concise. Remember the media is always seeking a sound bite. When you have made your point, stop talking. Simple statements are less likely to be edited. By being honest, understandable and positive, you will help your organization's side of the story be heard and remembered.
5. Remember: There is no such thing as "off the record".
6. Do not allow yourself to be intimidated or controlled by a reporter. If asked several questions at once, select the most important to answer first. Be sure to get your points across. If a question is rephrased, simply answer, "My response is the same as before." Then restate exactly what you originally said, word for word. If you are interrupted in the middle of your response with another question, wait for the reporter to finish and then say, "As I was saying in response to your previous question. ..."

If the reporter makes an inaccurate statement simply correct the inaccuracy and state what is true. Reporter: "We're hearing that more than 25 youth were trapped in the bus and injured." Response: "At this point I don't know the total number of people who were injured. We do know there were 45 teenaged youth on board the bus, along with seven adult chaperones."

7. Do not reveal personal or professional confidences. This could lead to legal difficulties.
8. Do not respond to hypothetical "what if" questions. In other words, don't speculate. Politely say you wouldn't or don't know what would happen "if." If you're asked, "Why would a priest do such a thing?" respond by saying, "I don't know. I wish we did have all the answers, and I hope we soon will."
9. When answering unfriendly questions, listen for hot-button words that might trigger a negative response, words like irresponsible, reckless, sexual misconduct, rip-off, bias, prejudice, liberal, conservative, bureaucrat, insensitive, etc. Do not repeat such words in your response. Be friendly, yet professional. Maintain eye contact. Avoid defensive statements like, "Where did you get that information?" It's okay to pause before answering to collect your thoughts. This is often interpreted as your being thoughtful and is far better than stuttering about while trying to collect your thoughts.

10. Do not play favorites. Any information that goes to one contact during a crisis goes to all.
11. When questioned about a prepared statement, do not rephrase or restate it, simply repeat phrases from the statement.
12. Provide background information, including photos and biographical information. This helps with understanding and accuracy and conserves your time. Official positions of the church can be made available. Reporters may ask for your personal interpretation and opinions - stick to the official talking points.
13. Anticipate calls from reporters and plan ahead. Reporters often want to localize national news stories by contacting a local authority or official.
14. Whenever you are meeting with the press, dress in medium and dark colors. Avoid narrow stripes, checks and plaids.
15. Understand the media and do all you can to meet their needs without compromising your own integrity or that of your organization.
16. The way in which you say something determines whether the listener will choose to hear your message. Strive to be friendly, conversational and relaxed.
17. Choose two or three key points you need to make and pick a phrase like "in-depth investigation", "compassionate, yet fair" for each. Labels are irresistible to reporters and often end up in headlines.
18. Anticipate reporters' questions, both the obvious and those that strike fear in your heart, even if it is impossible for any reporter to have enough information to even pose the questions. Develop responses. In some cases you will have to state that such matters are confidential or still under investigation, but that you will tell them all that you can without violating church policy.  
  
In other cases your response might be, "We don't know that yet. We're looking into it." or "We hope that isn't the case, but we are determined to discover the truth." or "We don't know what the outcome will be, but I'll be available to talk with again once we do know."
19. Reporters most often determine their lines of questioning by noting your level of discomfort. If you maintain a conversational, informal tone, you can help to determine the course of the interview.
20. Be aware of your body language and the surroundings in which the interview is taking place.

# CRISIS MANAGER UNIVERSITY

## **SEND Button Crisis by Jonathan Bernstein**

Some crisis prevention is pretty darn mundane.

Most of us, at least once, have embarrassed ourselves or even caused significant harm by sending email (a) to people who should not have seen it or (b) containing accurate or inaccurate information that we belatedly regretted providing. Last February, Cornell University sent welcoming letters to 1,700 high school students who had submitted early-decision applications, including nearly 550 who had already been rejected in December. Soon thereafter, it sent another email apologizing for any confusion and distress the message had caused and explaining that it was a result of a coding error.

The apology didn't, of course, protect the 550 students from the emotional whiplash that resulted, although the school then did the best damage control it could muster under the circumstances.

Here are some very low-tech, practical ways of reducing the frequency of "SEND Button Crises":

**Don't Fill In The "To" Blank** – If you don't fill in your addressee's name, the email can't be sent. That precludes crises resulting simply from accidentally hitting the SEND button with a mouse click or by the keyboard combination which also activates SEND

**SEND to Yourself First** – Before I distribute this email, I email it to myself first and see what it looks/reads like, in addition to asking at least one person to proofread it for me. I'm old-style enough that for careful proofing, I need to print something out. I found multiple errors in this issue after proofreading a printout. And I'm now braced for readers to point out some that might have been missed (he said with a grin).

**Minimize Emotional Misinterpretation** – It is VERY VERY easy to read emotions into someone's written words. Sometimes accurately, sometimes not, either way with periodically disastrous results. I have had readers take offense at their interpretation of what I've written, even though I'd meant something significantly different. One way to minimize that is to take a bit more time in writing to add words which communicate how you're feeling. Read the last sentence of the previous bullet point as an example.

# TELLING THE STORY NEWS PRESS RELEASE

★ The **Episcopal Diocese** *of Texas*

When you have something that is timely and newsworthy, write it and email it immediately to your local news sources: radio stations, television stations and local newspaper. These days, most news agencies have a link on their websites through which you can send a press release or story idea.

If you are sending a news item about an upcoming event or speaker, be sure to do so two weeks in advance, and follow up with an additional notification a week out. Photo opportunities are especially appreciated and if you have a good photo from the previous year (Blessing of the Animals or Ashes to Go) be sure to include it.

Make sure you include the church's full name, a contact name, phone number and email. Use a cell number that someone will actually answer, not the church office if you have limited hours during which someone will answer the phone.

Date the release and indicate that it is for "Immediate Release." The communicator's name should appear here too, with a telephone number to call for further information.

**December 1, 2018**  
**For Immediate Release**  
**Contact: Jane Scott**  
**409.520.6444**  
**[jscott@gmail.com](mailto:jscott@gmail.com)**

It's a good idea to spend some time on the headline and a one or two-line sentence summarizing the release.

**Example: St. George's welcomes retired veterinarian as new rector**

You should compose the text as if it were going directly into print. Every news release, however brief, should contain the Five Ws: Who, What, When, Where and Why (sometimes How is pertinent). Even the simplest of announcements should contain these essentials. Write as if a person reading knows nothing about your church.

Most of the time the Five Ws should be stated in the first paragraph. Amplify the statements in the subsequent paragraphs, beginning with the most important information and ending with the least important. Try to keep your press release to 200-250 words.

Remember this: 95 percent of readers do not read past the headline. Ninety-five percent of those who do, don't read past the first paragraph. Get the most important or most interesting material as high up in the story as you can. Sometimes that is not the chairperson of an event or the name of the church.

## BOILER PLATE

Create a paragraph about your church and the congregation that sums up your ministry and vision and that can be added to the end of every news release or feature story.

**Example: St. Mathias' Episcopal Church was established in 1874 near downtown Austin. A diverse community, St. Mathias seeks to support our community through low-cost after-school programs, senior citizen support ministries and outreach to those in prison. For more information, call 555.312.2345 or visit our website at [www.stmathias.org](http://www.stmathias.org).**

You can also add this:

Ed. note: When referring to a clergy person, man or woman, first reference should be "the Rev. Kelly Smith." The adjective "Rev.," short for Reverend, should not be used alone. Referring to members of this church, please know "Episcopal" is an adjective, "Episcopalian" is a noun. It is incorrect to refer to Episcopalians as "Episcopals" or to refer to the Episcopal Church as "the Episcopalian Church."

Thank you.

## FACTS

Check your facts. Check your facts. Check your facts. Make sure your phone numbers, dates and times are correct. Be sure you quote sources correctly, verify spelling of names. Give exact times, with a.m. or p.m. indicated and the day of the week as well as the calendar date for coming events.

## QUOTES

The importance of using quotes in a news story cannot be emphasized too strongly. There are few stories that are not enhanced with direct quotes, even if only a single statement by someone involved. Obviously, the more lively and provocative the statement, the better. Don't editorialize in your news release. Let the quote carry the interest or color the details for you.

**Example: "Last year we had a hedgehog and a boa constrictor at the pet blessing," said the Rev. Sue Smith, rector of St. Mathias Episcopal Church. "We always welcome anyone in our community to join our pet blessing, especially if it is someone with a service dog," she added.**

Submit photo possibilities with news release to broadcasters

Broadcast media regard news releases as source material or suggestions for stories the station might choose to cover. Keep in mind that television is looking for lively and colorful action. With your press release, submit a list of photo possibilities. In case of radio, you may submit a suggested public service announcement with the press release. These should be no more than 75 words — less if possible.

# SAMPLE NEW RELEASE

★ The **Episcopal Diocese of Texas**

## Press Release

For Immediate Release  
September 27, 2018  
Contact: Carol E. Barnwell  
o. 713.520.6444 or  
c. 713.703.2652  
cbarnwell@epicenter.org

### **Downtown Churches Include Service Animals in Annual Blessing**

Two Episcopal churches in Houston have included service animals in their annual observance of St. Francis Day pet blessing events. Both the canine unit and the mounted horse patrol have been invited to participate with seeing eye dogs and a myriad of house pets from iguanas to guinea pigs. The usual dogs and cats are also invited on Saturday, October 12, 2003 at 4:00 p.m., Christ Church Cathedral, 1117 Texas Ave., and Trinity Episcopal Church, 1015 Holman.

Clergy, vested in white robes, will hold a brief service outside on the lawn. The animals will be sprinkled with holy water and blessed for their love and service. Treats will be served to both two-legged and four-legged participants. El Orbits, performing in animal costumes and singing animal-themed songs, will provide the music.

Information on St. Francis may be found here ([link](#)). To interview participating clergy email: Carol E. Barnwell at call her at 713.520.6444.