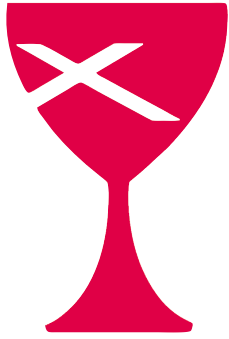


Crises in Your Church: Planning Can Make The Difference

**CRISIS
COMMUNICATION
PLAN**

A Guide for Congregational Planning to Handle the Unexpected



Crises in Your Church: Planning Can Make The Difference

Churches are not immune to crises. Whether it is a fire, a tornado that destroys church property, or financial mismanagement, crises can happen.

The headlines of the past point out that religious organizations are no exception to crises.

- The continuing sexual abuse cases reported to the Catholic Church
- The embezzlement of money connected with the Church of Christ
- The bankruptcy filing of the National Benevolent Association, and its impact on senior citizens and youth within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
- Church fires around the country – some accidental, some arson
- Natural disasters such as hurricanes that dislocate people or destroy property

The best way to avoid a crisis is to ensure the systems, processes and personnel are in place to prevent a crisis in whatever form it may take. The old adage that *prevention is the best medicine* certainly applies. For example, a policy that requires extensive background screening for people who will work with children may prevent issues of child abuse later.

Crises happen, regardless of the cause. The church prepared for crisis management can save its reputation as a house of God.

News, like nature, abhors a vacuum. Media will get a story and an organization, corporate or church, must be proactive to make sure its side is present! There is a painfully short **24-hour window** in which the organization can retain control of the

situation or forever play catch-up. When a crisis occurs is no time to *think* about *developing* a crisis plan OR start *playing it by ear*.

What is a church crisis?

A crisis is any event, activity or action that goes beyond the "oh, no" response and will damage the reputation of your church, region, unit, or denomination.

Unfortunately, churches of all shapes, sizes, and beliefs have had to endure a variety of crises. A church crisis can be anything:

- " Storm or natural disaster
- " In-church accident and injury – a slip and fall
- " Church fire
- " Embezzlement or financial malfeasance
- " Legal issue that may become public and could damage the reputation of the institution.
- " Morals issues involving spiritual leadership, pastors, or staff
- " Questions of theology, life styles
- " Death of a minister or church leader
- " Retirement of a leader
- " Improper activities at church camp
- " And much more...

Deal with the crises and people...

As a community of faith it is important to seek the fine balance of maintaining our humanity and demonstrate true caring, forgiveness and love for those involved. At the same time you have to protect your reputation as a true house of worship, maintain your credibility as a religious institution and protect the safety of your members.

From a strictly legal perspective you also must keep in mind potential litigation and financial risks that could arise from your crisis. Those issues could range from financial exposure to libel and slander suits.

Develop your crisis plan before you need it!

Be prepared: It's not a question of "IF a crisis will happen" but "WHEN will it happen."

Your crisis plan begins with identifying all possible crises your church may encounter. The list above is only a beginning of the type of crisis you may have to consider. Your list will change depending on your situation. For example, if your church is in an urban area surrounded by multi-lane highways you may want to include a contingency should a member be involved in an auto accident nearby; or, if your church is located near water, how would your church respond if there was an accidental drowning?

Here are components your plan must have:

- ❖ Who has "command control?"
 - When your crisis starts *is not* the time to decide **who**, as the military says, has "command and control." In the tension of the emergency, split-second decisions can not be made by consensus or committee. You must have a designated leader to take charge of your crisis. That could be your minister, the board moderator or another qualified person.

- ❖ Who is the spokesperson?
 - There must be only ONE designated spokesperson. All information from the minister or the board must be channeled through the spokesperson for media and other key constituencies. Preferably your spokesperson should have communications and media experience. Do not put your church member or the community in the position of trying to figure out what is happening because the minister and the moderator and the choir director are each making public statements about the crisis.
- ❖ Is there a *command central* for all information and decision-making?
 - You should have a common place for all decision makers to congregate, share information, and make decisions. This should be determined before your crisis strikes.
- ❖ Do you have contact lists of all critical constituencies that are immediately available to all key decision makers? Are your contact lists in a variety of formats – from desk-tops to PDAs, to a non-electronic paper notebook? The early stage of a crisis is not the time to be searching for the Year Book and Directory trying to locate a key person.
- ❖ Can you immediately contact psychological crisis counselors for victims, your staff and members? Crisis psychological counseling is different than the kind of spiritual counseling with which your ministerial staff may be familiar.
- ❖ Remember the media and the information they need. The media are going to be a part of your crisis whether you want them or not. How you deal with the media will affect the future of your church. Build your relationships early with your local reporters.
 - Through your predetermined spokesperson, your plan should provide guidelines to keep a flow of information that is accurate and verifiable.
 - Triage media contacts and requests.
 - Plan when you release information to the media.
 - Coordinate with other church units locally or regionally including legal.

- ❖ Your crisis includes more than just those directly involved. Your plan should have comprehensive records and telephone numbers to immediately reach church members, the Regional Ministry, emergency responders; local, regional, national government officials including law enforcement, neighbors, local media (the pipeline to your major constituencies) and religious media.
- ❖ What are your follow-up plans? After most crises, and after the adrenaline rush is gone, there is a time for necessary rebuilding. Faith must be supported, the hurt reassured, the congregation confident that the church can and will continue. Your crisis plan should consider what you do after the last of the crisis has dissipated.

Dealing With the News Media

By definition “news” is not good. It is the legitimate purpose of the news media to cover stories of interest to their community. Unfortunately, that means they will probably cover your crisis. The reputation of your church and congregation can rest on how you deal with the reporters covering your situation.

There is a rule of thumb that says there is a 24-hour window during which you can positively manage a crisis. Being prepared with a crisis plan will give you more action time.

Generally, reporters are not out to crucify or castigate anybody – they have little personal interest. They have a job to do. Your crisis, as serious as it is to you, is just another story to them: 20-column inches to fill in the newspaper, or a 90-second story to produce for television. Unless you give them a reason, by stonewalling, saying “no comment” or giving them other reasons to think “this is more than it seems,” you can expect their interest to diminish in a day or so.

Remember – reporters are a pipeline to your neighbors and members. Take advantage of the opportunity to tell your side of the story in that window of opportunity.

In a faith community, no one likes controversy, but it arises. Always respond in a controversy, otherwise, the opposition has an unchallenged soap-box. “Unavailable for comment” or “wouldn't appear on camera” or worse yet, **“no comment”** automatically says you're “guilty.” The guilty label raises critical issues about your truthfulness and credibility.

Here are guidelines for working with reporters and editors:

- ❖ Develop a relationship with reporters before your crisis. Work with them on good news stories about things happening at your congregation. Invite them to the church for a visit. Give them insight into religious issues in your community.
- ❖ Anticipate reporters' questions and prepare possible responses.
- ❖ In a crisis of pain and suffering, always relate to the humanity and spirituality of the situation before you talk about bricks and mortar.
- ❖ Never release the names of the deceased or injured unless you can verify that families have been properly notified.
- ❖ If you don't know an answer, do not try to fake a response. Tell the reporters you don't know and that you'll get back to them. And then, get back to them with the information.
- ❖ **Never say 'no comment!'** "No comment" instantly implies "guilt."
- ❖ Keep the news media informed. Schedule regular times when you will meet with them, even if you have little to update. News media work on a continual news "cycle" and they always need to know what is happening.
- ❖ Keep track of all media calls and the questions they ask.
- ❖ Assign someone in the church to watch TV newscasts, read the newspapers and listen to the radio to make sure there are no glaring inaccuracies being reported. If a significant issue arises, talk to the reporter in a polite way and clarify the situation.
- ❖ Contact the Communication Ministries office at the Disciples Center in Indianapolis for suggestions and assistance. They can be reached at 317-713-2492.

Work in an honest, open and forthright way with reporters during the crisis. This approach will help you develop strong relationships for the future.

Top 10+1 Crisis Commandment©

- 10 Not IF, but WHEN
- 9 Have a plan
- 8 Know media before you need them
- 7 Be committed to open and honest communications
- 6 Immediately notify emergency responders and/or regulatory agencies
- 5 Don't immediately admit fault or try to spread the blame
- 4 If there is a death or injury, the spokesperson must immediately express concern and sympathy to families and the injured.
- 3 Have one person designated as spokesperson.
- 2 Tell facts as they develop, Do not speculate. Rely on investigative sources for details.
- 1 NEVER, NEVER SAY "NO COMMENT"
- 1+1 Retain a trained public relations professional or consult the Communication Ministries Department at the Disciples Center in Indianapolis for counsel. Take their suggestions as trained counselors.

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Crisis Management Matrix©

The following are *thought* starters for crises that may affect your church and congregation. Some of the proposed situations are quite serious, but they happen. These give you guidelines and suggestions about how to deal with many of the worst kind of crises you may confront.

These guidelines should be included in your crisis plan.

From these suggestions you should think through more possibilities and prepare potential responses. Preparing before an emergency will allow you to make thought out and informal decisions when a crisis occurs.

Crisis Matrix™

<i>Event</i>	<i>Why is this a crisis?</i>	<i>Initial response</i>	<i>Possible questions and answers</i>
Missing child in facility or walk away.	<p>Affects reputation as child care provider.</p> <p>A child's safety is endangered.</p>	<p>"At about 1:00 pm. today we were alerted that a child had walked away from our day care facility. Police were immediately notified and we are cooperating with their efforts. We are praying for her/his safe return and our entire congregation's hearts and prayers go out to the child and his/her family."</p>	<p>Q: Who is the child? A: We are not releasing that information until we get clearance from the police. Q: How did the child get out? A: Right now we're concentrating our prayers on her/his safe return. We're assisting the police as we investigate this unfortunate incident. Q: How many times has this happened in the past? A: This is the first incident of this type. We have received meritorious reviews from our certification body in the past.</p>
Dispute between a church and some of its membership	Exposes rift between church and membership	<p>"This is a difficult theological issue, but the fact we're discussing it openly demonstrates that our church welcomes varied opinions."</p>	

Event	Why is this a crisis?	Initial response	Possible questions and answers
Criticism by legislative body	Raises a church/state issue.	“We respect the opinions of the elected body, but in this case we see a serious issue of...”	
Fire, explosion: building is severely damaged or destroyed. No one is injured.	Building may have been damaged, but the “church” remains. People need to know there were no injuries.	<p>“Our building may have been damaged, but the house of the Lord does not depend on brick and mortar. We are praying that we can bring our congregation together again.”</p> <p>“Our prayers of thanks go to all of the emergency responders who risked their lives for our church. We are likewise thankful that no one was in the building when this tragedy occurred and that no firefighters were injured as they did their jobs.”</p>	<p>Q: When was the alarm turned in? A: Our alarm service reported the fire to the County Fire Department at 00:00 p.m.</p> <p>Q: Was there anyone in the building at the time? A: We’re thankful the building was empty at the time.</p> <p>Q: What caused the fire? A: That’s a question you’ll have to ask the fire department. We’re not fire experts.</p> <p>Q: Were smoke detectors in operation? A: Yes.</p>

<i>Event</i>	<i>Why is this a crisis?</i>	<i>Initial response</i>	<i>Possible questions and answers</i>
Emergency evacuation: attack, chemical spill.	Issue of public safety	<p>“At 1:00 p.m. an odor of undetermined origin was discovered in the education wing. We immediately evacuated the church and called the Smallville Fire Department.</p> <p>“At the time we had 100 children, ages 5-12 in school and nine staff people in the building. All exited the building without a problem as per our emergency plan.</p> <p>“We want to thank everyone for their prayers and assistance.”</p>	<p>Q: What caused the problem? A: That is under investigation by the Fire Dept.</p> <p>Q: When will you be able to return? A: As soon as the Fire Dept. clears the area and we’re able to clean the area.</p> <p>Q: How much damage, in dollars, was there? A: We don’t know yet. We’re thankful no one was injured. We’ll be working with our insurance company in the next few weeks to determine that kind of detail.</p>

<i>Event</i>	<i>Why is this a crisis?</i>	<i>Initial response</i>	<i>Possible questions and answers</i>
Funding issue: contributor objects to use of contribution.	Raises questions of financial credibility, philosophy and theology	<p>“We are praying for ways we can come to an understanding with Mr/Mrs. Donor. There are some differences in understanding of our original agreement, which we both agree is confidential.”</p> <p>“We are praying for discernment of ways we can come to an understanding with Mr/Mrs. Donor.</p>	<p>Q: When did this issue arise? A: We have been talking with Mr/Mrs. Donor for the last several weeks. Q: What was the original intent? A: That’s a part of our continuing confidential conversations. Q. How will this affect your programs? A: We have put the programs related to this donation on hold until our discussions have been completed. It does not affect other programs.</p>

Event	Why is this a crisis?	Initial response	Possible questions and answers
Minister, natural death	Question of succession, leadership	<p>“This is a difficult time for us. Pastor Smith was with us for 00 years...Our hearts and prayers go to his family and his many friends at 1st Street Church. In the mean time, Associate Minister Clark will assume interim minister responsibilities. We have a process in place for selecting a new pastor, but now we must concentrate on the spiritual and emotional needs of the families and offer our prayerful support.”</p> <p>The Regional Minister has been involved in all our discussions and also is pastorally caring for the Smith family.</p> <p>+++++</p> <p>Pension Fund has been notified and will send the initial death benefit for their immediate financial burden.</p>	<p>Q. Who is in charge of the congregation now?</p> <p>A: The Moderator (Board Chair, President, etc) continues to be the elected leader of 1st Street Church. Our Associate Minister is caring for the pastoral concerns of the congregation and is the day-to-day administrator. S/he is in constant dialogue with and is supported by the moderator and the Board of Elders.</p> <p>Q: What will happen to Pastor Smith’s family? Will they have to leave the parsonage? Will they have enough money to live?</p> <p>A: Associate Minister Clark is responding to the Smith family in their immediate grief. A plan for their next residence will come only after time and concern for their well being. This plan will be developed with them by a committee designated by the moderator.</p> <p>The Pension Fund has been notified and will send the initial death benefit for the family</p>

<i>Event</i>	<i>Why is this a crisis?</i>	<i>Initial response</i>	<i>Possible questions and answers</i>
Financial impropriety by an employee or member.	Raises questions of financial stability, management ability.	<p>“We became aware of some serious issues with our finances, through an internal audit. We have contacted the proper authorities and we are cooperating with them. The person who may have been involved has been suspended pending further investigation.</p> <p>“I want to assure our members that although this is a serious matter, it does not affect the future of our church.”</p> <p>The Regional Minister was immediately notified and will be apprised of the entire investigation.</p>	<p>Q: How much was involved? A: We’re investigating closely to determine that figure, but we are confident that it will not affect the future of our church.</p> <p>Q: How did you discover the loss? A: Our office staff noticed some irregularities and then we began the investigation.</p> <p>Q: Who was involved? A: Law enforcement officials are talking with some people of interest and they have asked us not to reveal the names.</p> <p>Q: Will there be criminal charges? A: The law officials have not yet advised us on this matter.</p>

<i>Event</i>	<i>Why is this a crisis?</i>	<i>Initial response</i>	<i>Possible questions and answers</i>
Sexual harassment charges against ministerial staff	<p>Traumatic violation of a member raises questions about the moral authority of the church and its leadership</p> <p>People are damaged by this act.</p>	<p>“This is a sad day for our church. The allegations cut to the heart of the trust placed in the church. We pray for everybody involved and ask for God’s guidance as we work through this difficult time.</p> <p>“We take these allegations seriously. Once we became aware of the situation, (person) was immediately suspended without pay from the church as the investigation continues.</p> <p>“We reported the allegations to the proper legal authorities and they are now conducting the investigation.”</p> <p>We also reported the allegations to the Regional Minister who will be informed each step of the process and bring the Commission on Ministry in when appropriate.</p>	<p>Q: How did you become aware of the alleged harassment?</p> <p>A: The alleged victim came to members of the board and we immediately began an investigation. The alleged perpetrator was immediately suspended as I mentioned before.</p> <p>Q: Will you or the victim press charges?</p> <p>A: What the victim wishes to do is up to her/him. We are looking at our options.</p> <p>Q: What can you tell us about the alleged perpetrator?</p> <p>A: Mr./Mrs. Smith had been an employee since 19???. He/she had served in a variety of capacities.”</p>

<i>Event</i>	<i>Why is this a crisis?</i>	<i>Initial response</i>	<i>Possible questions and answers</i>
Alleged child molestation by employee	<p>Raises questions about security checks in place for employee; reputation as a safe place for children</p> <p>Children's lives are damaged.</p>	<p>"This is a difficult time for our church. We are focusing our energies on people who may be involved. We are steadfastly praying for all. "I want to give you as much background as I can. Main Street Church was first informed of the allegations yesterday.</p> <p>"We immediately contacted the proper authorities and placed Mr./Ms. Smith on non-contact leave of absence as required by our written policies.</p> <p>"Church bylaws require full background checks on all people who come in contact with youth and children. "Those checks showed no irregularities with Mr./Ms Smith."</p> <p>The Regional Minister has been notified and will be apprised of each step in the investigation. The Regional Minister will involve the Commission on Ministry when appropriate.</p>	<p>Q: How long had the alleged perpetrator worked for the church?</p> <p>A: He/she had worked for us for 00 years following the required background check.</p> <p>Q: What was his/her job?</p> <p>A: She/he was...</p> <p>Q: Did he/she ever act weird?</p> <p>A: His/her behavior may be a part of the investigation and so it's not appropriate to respond to that question.</p> <p>A: What did he/she do?</p> <p>Q: Again, that's part of the investigation and you'll have to check with the authorities.</p> <p>A: How many incidents of this kind has the church had?</p> <p>Q: This is the only alleged incident like this. We feel our policies and procedures offer protection for incidents such as this.</p>

<i>Event</i>	<i>Why is this a crisis?</i>	<i>Initial response</i>	<i>Possible questions and answers</i>
Moral impropriety (not necessarily illegal) by minister or staff.	Raises issues about spiritual leadership of the church; quality of staff. Could affect funding and membership.	<p>“We are truly saddened by this incident. Our hearts and prayers go to all of those involved.</p> <p>“This is a difficult time for us, but with God’s spirit, guidance and forgiveness, Main Street church will be OK.</p> <p>“Our Board is investigating this incident. Mr./Mrs. Smith has been placed on suspension. We have provided counseling and other support services to the people involved.”</p>	<p>Q: How long has this been going on? A: That’s something we’re investigating. Our policies provide guidelines to conduct an investigation as this.”</p> <p>Q: How long had Rev./Mr./Mrs. Smith been at Main Street Church? A: He/she has been here for 00 years.</p> <p>Q: How will this affect church programs? A: We are a strong church. Our programs and our worship will not suffer. We are concerned about the individuals involved and we are praying steadfastly for them.”</p>