

Crisis Communication Plan The Presbytery of Carlisle

Background and Purpose

The Presbytery of Carlisle consists of fifty-two particular congregations, staff, minister members, educators, commissioned and non-commissioned lay pastors. Our ministry area encompasses a diverse, populous, complex, environment that includes military supply facilities and training schools, a nuclear reactor, an intricate system of highways and bridges, airports, colleges/universities, and governmental structures. As a part of the presbytery's Communication Initiative and Strategy, this crisis communication plan has been developed to address the need to be proactive, and to create a framework for implementation of this plan in the event of a crisis situation.

Communicator William N. Curry once said, "Crisis is a situation that puts your organization's values on trial in the court of public opinion." A crisis can be good as well as bad for an organization. No matter what the outcome, a crisis challenges and changes people and organizations. Also, a crisis attracts media attention, and becomes a pivotal point for the way organizations operate in the future. It's events affect the wider community.

Typically the five common components of a crisis are:

- 1) Crisis usually comes suddenly;
- 2) Adequate information and key leaders are not always available at a time of crisis;
- 3) Every crisis provides its own opportunity - early - to position the organization as it would like to be understood;
- 4) Each crisis has a life cycle; and
- 5) All crises tend to impair judgment and clear thinking.¹

Proactive preparation minimizes stress and confusion for staff, and maximizes competence, courtesy and pastoral care for those involved. Also, a crisis communication plan assures that crucial information will be delivered in a timely and accurate manner. The intent of this plan is to support the integrity of the ministry that the Presbytery of Carlisle is called to provide.

While this plan has been developed for the presbytery, churches are encouraged to use the document as a guideline for developing a process of their own.

What We Hope to Accomplish

Through these guidelines, the Presbytery of Carlisle seeks to establish a system of communication to implement in the event of a crisis or disaster, which will facilitate safety within the presbytery. Our goals are as follows:

- ❖ to communicate timely and truthful information;
- ❖ to share information with the media as appropriate;
- ❖ to provide spiritual nurture to those in the care of the presbytery, and
- ❖ to serve as a faithful witness.

¹Alan Griggs, former Director of Media Strategy, United Methodist Church

Crises/Disasters and Response Examples

Crisis Examples	<u>Timing and Information Released</u>	Target Audience for Information
Natural Disasters		
	<u>First 48 hours</u>	
Tornado	1. Preliminary assessments of people and facilities	To members of the congregation
Fire		To other affected congregations
Flood	2. Integration with local authorities: police, PEMA, FEMA, volunteer teams	To community via news media
Windstorm	3. Status of interrupted programming	
Blizzard	4. Central contact person: name, location, contact methods	
Earthquake	5. Schedule for future updates	
Hurricane		
TMI		
Human Disasters		
	<u>Scheduled updates</u>	
Epidemic	1. Recovery efforts to date	
Pandemic	2. Re-located and rescheduled events	
Vandalism	3. Requests for financial assistance and volunteer help	
Arson		
Burglary	<u>Final report</u>	
Explosion	1. Status of recovery efforts	
Act of War	2. Thanks to community for support	
Criminal/Legal Crisis		
	<u>At time the action becomes public</u>	
Lawsuits	1. Acknowledgment of suit or action	To the affected congregation
Staff Terminations	2. Upon advice or counsel, do not discuss the case further	To the media, as appropriate
Sexual harassment	3. Identification of spokesperson who will represent parties of interest for future contact	
Sexual misconduct		
Criminal acts by Staff or members		
	<u>At the conclusion of action</u>	
	1. Release summary of judgments	
	2. Express thanks, patience, understanding and forgiveness, as appropriate.	
Acts & Demonstrations		
	<u>During event</u>	
Terrorist acts	1. Nature of situation, who is involved, issues of conflict, status of events	To all congregation members
Public demonstrations	2. Roles of church members and local safety authorities	To the media. As appropriate
Bomb threats		
Hostage situations		
	<u>Immediately following event</u>	
	1. Outcomes of issues, agreements reached	
	2. Progress and scheduling of future meetings, as needed	
	3. Concluding observations	
Personnel/Pastoral Crisis		
Resignation	A letter to the congregation announcing the resignation.	To the congregation via pulpit
Termination	Cite reasons only if appropriate.	
Injury	As needed helping with the Board of Pensions	
Hospitalization	As near to event as possible	
Mental, Emotional		
Personnel/Pastoral Crisis, cont.	Expression of sorrow, care, compassion	Congregation & media as appropriate

Death	Concern for family.	
Perception Crisis Misunderstanding re: Presbytery action	Issuance of clarification statements	To all Presbytery churches for their distribution to members.
Systems, Financial or Positive Crises	To deal with the crises and to report to the Presbytery of the findings and conclusions.	To the Presbytery, en banc.
Denominational Crises Dissolution request	Notify the appropriate committee(s), officers, presbytery staff, legal counsel, General Assembly	Appropriate internal persons & committees. Respond to media via Legal Counsel.

Crisis Communication Team

The Crisis Communication Team (CCT) may consist of the Executive Presbyter, the Stated Clerk, the Associate for Communications & Office Management, the Moderator of Presbytery and the Presbytery’s legal counsel (if needed and invited.) Any one of the members may convene the crisis team. In the event that all members of the team are unavailable, the Synod will implement its plan.

The CCT will appoint a **crisis coordinator**, spokesperson for the Presbytery, and media coordinator. Ordinarily the Executive Presbyter will serve as crisis coordinator and as spokesperson. Alternately, the Stated Clerk or the Presbytery’s Moderator may fill the role of crisis coordinator. Ordinarily, the Associate for Communications and Office Management will serve as media coordinator.

When appropriate to a particular crisis, upon recommendation from the crisis team, the crisis coordinator will invite others to join the crisis team. For example: Chair of the Committee on Ministry, additional media consultants or legal counsel.

For communication purposes the names and contact information for current members of the Crisis Team and other Presbytery staff will be held at the Presbytery office, at the homes of all members of the Crisis Team, and by the Synod. The Crisis Communications Team does not act in matters that are the responsibility or purview of standing committees of presbytery, unless called upon to do so.

Communication Strategy

When the presbytery faces a crisis, the following communication strategy will be employed at the direction of the Crisis Communication Team, so that a coordinated response is implemented.

- 1) The CCT will convene immediately upon learning of a crisis or in anticipation of such.
- 2) The CCT will gather facts and analyze the situation, drawing upon other resources as necessary to complete the task. Such analysis includes, but is not limited to, the scope of the situation, any legal implications, the public’s perception and other related events (past and future).
- 3) If possible within the first two hours, the CCT will identify pastoral needs and develop the key message(s) that will be conveyed. With integrity the key message(s) present the presbytery’s viewpoint on information that has been released in a proactive way.

- 4) As necessary, the CCT will request presbytery staff to perform specific duties that might include, but are not limited to: pastoral care; fact finding and information gathering; notification of the parties involved; and communicating with volunteers, staff, emergency officials, and insurers.
- 5) The CCT will determine the means and frequency of communication with internal and external audiences, including the media. The notification process will follow.
- 6) The internal audiences include: members of the Presbytery of Carlisle, the Presbytery of Carlisle staff, officers, Coordinating Council, Committee on Ministry and other appropriate presbytery entities; Synod of the Trinity staff, presbyteries within the synod; leadership of subsidiary and affiliate corporations; and the clergy, elders and other lay leaders of the congregations of presbytery.
- 7) The external audiences include: staff of other governing bodies in the denomination; the staff of General Assembly Council; the Presbyterian News Service; ecumenical and community leaders within the presbytery's bounds, and general media.
- 8) The CCT will convene and brief the presbytery staff as soon as practical. Also, the CCT will see that appropriate communications are made with other internal audiences as soon as possible.
- 9) The spokesperson will be the primary speaker for the presbytery. This allows the presbytery's point of view to be heard clearly and unambiguously. There will be situations where others might be asked to speak publically about certain aspects of a situation. If possible, these individuals will communicate fully with the CCT prior to and following acting in this role.
- 10) To maintain readiness for communication with internal and external audiences, the Associate for Communication and Office Management is responsible for keeping current internal rosters and external rosters identified in points 7 & 8.
- 11) Upon request, the CCT will draft and make available an official statement regarding the crisis.
- 12) The CCT will identify space within the presbytery office and/or elsewhere for its use in carrying out the crisis communication strategy.
- 13) The CCT will follow the crisis communication strategy until the crisis is over, at which time the CCT will carry out a post-crisis debriefing and review.

Responding to the Media

The following media guidelines will be followed so that the crisis communication plan can be implemented effectively:

Ordinarily, the Executive Presbyter is the spokesperson for the Presbytery.

The Associate for Communications & Office Management will be responsible for

- maintaining a biography and photo of each Presbytery staff member as well as a lexicon of church terminology and appropriate fact sheets, which may be provided to the media;
- Serve as media coordinator acting on requests for information and comments, providing the media with logistical support, checking information for correctness before its release, and monitoring the media for accuracy
- will also maintain a media log throughout the crisis logging all media calls received, listing issues raised by the media, and media coverage of the crisis.
- will be responsible for keeping copies of all documents prepared and distributed to internal and external audiences throughout the crisis and maintain files of final reports.

Depending upon the particular crisis and time constraints, the crisis team will make appropriate use of communication tools such as in-person contact, telephone, fax, e-mail, website, newsletters, regular mail, and express services.

Whenever practical, communications with both internal and external audiences are to contain the key messages the crisis team has identified.

Relating to the media in a cooperative manner is an important element of the crisis communication plan. The crisis team, especially the spokesperson, needs to follow these basic principles in maintaining positive media relations that the media coordinator has established:

- Be accessible and accommodating to the media
- Avoid delaying responses to media requests, unless absolutely necessary
- Answer all questions directly and briefly as possible, in a straightforward manner
- Respond to questions factually and not in a reactionary or defensive manner
- Do not argue with reporters, and never speak “off the record”
- Avoid speculation and allocation of blame
- Provide supplemental information in the form of fact sheets
- Do not use the church and ecclesiastical jargon without a clear definition/explanation
- When an answer is not available, explain the reason and offer to respond within a specific time frame

Debriefing and Review of Communication Responses and Plan Effectiveness

In the event the crisis response team has been activated to deal with a crisis or a disaster, it is highly desirable that post-crisis evaluation occur. To that end, after a crisis or a disaster, the Crisis Communication Task Force shall be reconstituted, and meet with at least one representative of the Crisis Response team.

The primary intent of this meeting will be to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the Crisis Communication Plan.

The following questions will be used to guide this post-crisis evaluation:

- In what ways was the Crisis Communication Plan helpful and instructive for the response team?
- What appropriate changes or additions were made to adjust the plan for this situation?
- What expectations were not met using the plan?
- What appropriate changes or additions were made to adjust the plan for this situation?
- In this situation, how did goals of the plan meet the needs of the crisis and vice-versa?
- In what ways can the plan be adjusted for greater clarity and stress reduction?

If the Crisis Communication Task Force determines that changes to the Plan are needed, it shall be the task force's responsibility to propose those changes to Presbytery.

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