

Oklahoma Annual Conference Crisis Communication Plan

A crisis in this case refers to any event or emergency that brings unexpected public attention to the Annual Conference, or to one or more of its churches or agencies of the conference. In a crisis, questions can come from the media almost immediately. It is crucial that we respond in a positive, prepared manner and do not convey hesitancy or avoidance. The goal is to provide information that helps to maintain trust in the Church and its leadership. What is at stake is our reputation as a caring, healing institution - indeed, as ambassadors of Christ.

DEFINITIONS

CRISIS

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

EMERGENCY

A situation that requires immediate attention and may attract the attention of media and/or public.

CONTROVERSY

A situation that calls attention to a divide in the denomination, conference or local church.

SOME TYPES OF POTENTIAL CRISES INVOLVING THE CHURCH OR CONFERENCE

PERSONNEL

Clergy or staff misconduct; death, illness or injury to a pastor or pastoral family member.

CRIMINAL OR LEGAL ACTION

VIOLENT ACTS, DEMONSTRATIONS, DEATH OR INJURIES

CORPORATE CRISIS

Suits against the Conference, a Conference institution, agency or church; division on an issue within the Conference. Examples: camper attacked at church camp; explosion at a church facility; lawsuit against conference; threatening letters to conference that become public.

PERCEIVED CRISIS

Seems to be a crisis-even if it isn't; anticipation of something happening which may or may not be based on facts or probability.

POSITIVE CRISIS

Donations exceed what is needed or can be handled; event or ministry draws more than anticipated response.

NATURAL DISASTERS AFFECTING CHURCHES OR COMMUNITIES

THE CRISIS MANAGEMENT TEAM (CMT) OF THE AC WILL INCLUDE:

- Bishop
- Conference Director of Communications
Assistant to the Bishop
- Conference Director of Connectional Ministries
- Conference Treasurer
- Dean of Cabinet
- District Superintendent(s)
–related to the affected church(es)

OTHERS WHO MAY BE INVOLVED DEPENDING UPON THE SITUATION:

- Conference Chancellor
- Conference Trustee Chairperson

In the case of a personal or institutional crisis, any member of the Crisis Management Team who is involved may be relieved of responsibility at the discretion of the Presiding Bishop.

An up-to-date list of contact information for the team members (office, home, cell, fax, e-mail) will be kept on file with this document in the Communications Office, Bishop's Office, Conference Director of Connectional Ministries office, Treasurers office, Dean of the Cabinet office.

In addition, when a team member is traveling, an itinerary and contact information should be left with the Conference Office, the Bishop's office and/or the assistant to the Bishop's office.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF CRISIS MANAGEMENT TEAM

BISHOP AND/OR BACK-UP CRISIS COMMUNICATION TEAM LEADER SHALL:

- Chair meetings of the CMT
- Assign duties to members of the CMT
- Approve media statements and release of other information
- Designate spokesperson
- Communicate with key people in the community and other United Methodist Agencies as appropriate.

DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS SHALL:

- Serve as CMT Coordinator and,
- Gather facts and information about crisis
- Work with CMT to develop media statements
- Coach the spokesperson prior to media interviews
- Prepare background information for the media
- Activate internal communications networks
- Respond to all inquiries from the media
- Serve as spokesperson, when designated
- Direct and coach support staff on how to handle calls during crisis
- Provide crisis communication training for conference and local churches

THE CMT SHOULD:

- Gather information about the crisis
- Assess the scope and severity of crisis
- Designate a spokesperson to talk to the media
- Develop a brief, initial statement to provide to the media
- This statement should include:
 - Brief, confirmed facts about what happened
 - Explanation of church's (annual conference) response
 - Expression of care and concern for any victims
- Determine whether a member of the CMT should be dispatched immediately to the location of the crisis.
- Decide whether additional members of the CMT should be contacted.
- Develop an Action Plan that includes further communications with the media and other internal/external audiences.

THE CONFERENCE CHANCELLOR/LEGAL COUNSEL WILL:

- Provide information on liability and legal issues related to the crisis Review statements and releases for legal implications. Provide a list of other lawyers to be contacted if they cannot be contacted or are out of the area.

THE CONFERENCE CENTER STAFF AND DISTRICT SUPPORT STAFF WILL:

- Direct calls as instructed and keep a log of all messages related to the crisis. Transmit them to the Director of Communications. Assist information flow as directed.
- Watch for and clip newspaper articles. Transmit them to the Director of Communications. When possible, log and transmit information about radio and television news reports.

- Not attempt to answer questions, even if they have information (unless otherwise instructed to do so). This is the sole responsibility of the designated spokesperson(s).

TEAM MEMBERS/SPOKESPERSONS HAVE THE RIGHT TO:

- Accept or decline an interview.
- Know the issues before speaking. Know who else has been or will be or might be interviewed. Be comfortable. Pause to think.
- Give reasons why you do not have information. NEVER say "no comment."
- Instead say something like, "I don't know" or I am not in a position to discuss that at this time."
- Be sure to get back with callers when you "do know."
- Ask them when their deadline is.
- Avoid setting an overly ambitious time line for when you will get back to a reporter. Give a specific time that you will call back (1 hour, 4 p.m., etc.) and then stick to it even if it is to say that you do not yet have the promised information.

In the event of a crisis, or learning of a potential crisis situation, the Bishop or person designated by the Bishop will immediately convene as many members of the CMT as possible. If necessary, the team may convene by conference call.

The CMT will develop a preliminary official statement and strategy for the release of information, determining:

- what information will be released,
- when,
- to whom,
- and by what means (printed release, press conference, etc).

The CMT should determine as quickly as possible what information to convey to local church and conference leaders so they can learn about the situation directly and not through the media.

The Bishop is usually the authorized media spokesperson. Depending on the situation, the Bishop may designate another person- usually the Director of Communications—to speak in their place. The spokesperson must be thoroughly briefed, prepared and if at all possible—clear releases with the Bishop/CMT before making any appearances or statements.

If needed, the Director of Communications in consultation with the Bishop will establish a schedule for regular briefings with the CMT during the first

few days of the crisis when media interest will be most intense.

Team members will need to be accessible 24-hours each day during the first day or two of the crisis, or longer as needed.

If the Bishop or CMT suspects there might be legal implications, especially before or after a media contact, the Bishop or his/her designee should contact the Chancellor at any time.

THE FIRST 90 MINUTES

1. When a team member or other conference staff person becomes aware of a crisis or impending crisis, that person will contact the Bishop's Office and the Director of Communications immediately.
2. The Bishop or designee will assemble the CMT in an appropriate location (i.e. Conference Office or Bishop's Office) or via a conference call.
3. The CMT will immediately assess the nature and extent of the crisis. Questions to ask:
 - Who knows about the situation?
 - What do they know?
 - What is the current status of the situation?
 - What can we expect to occur over the next few hours?
4. As soon as basic facts are known, the CMT will prepare a brief statement to be distributed. The statement will say what can be said, including facts about what happened and what the CMT intends to do.
5. The CMT will respond immediately to all inquiries. It is important that a statement be delivered within the first 90 minutes or reporters will seek other sources of information beyond our control. Each inquiry from a reporter needs a response ASAP.

APPROPRIATE RESPONSES TO 'BUY TIME':

"We're looking into the situation. I understand you have a job to do and I understand that you have to get the facts. I don't believe I know enough information at this time to tell you. As soon as I have information, I will call you immediately. When is your deadline?" I appreciate your call. I or our Director of Communications will be in touch with you as soon as I(/we) have anything I (/we) can share with you about that."

Quickly uncover as many facts as you can, develop a statement of facts and be back in touch with the media.

CONFERENCE MEDIA POLICY

It is the policy of the Oklahoma Conference of the United Methodist Church to provide accurate, timely and consistent information to the news media, the public and our constituencies.

To ensure clear and consistent communications with the news media, all staff with the Oklahoma Conference should direct questions from the news media to the Director of Communications.

Local church staff should handle local media inquiries in accordance with individual church's media policy. It is recommended that if an issue, event or 'crisis' involves news media inquiries, questions should be referred to the Pastor, District Superintendent, Conference Director of Communication or designated conference spokesperson.

LOCAL CHURCH MEDIA POLICY

Each local church should provide an outline of a media policy to deal with 'crisis' that largely pertain to the local church. Any crisis that might effect the annual conference, district and/or the denomination reverts to the annual conference media plan.

WHEN THE MEDIA CALLS:

Refer media inquiries that come into the conference office, to the designated spokesperson or the department of Communications.

When possible let all conference staff, superintendents and leaders know, who the spokesperson is and where to refer inquiries.

ANY TEAM MEMBER SPEAKING FOR THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE

SHOULD:

- Prepare mentally for the interview. What will you say?
- Check your emotional state.
- Listen carefully to the entire question you are being asked.
- Choose your words carefully. Respond briefly; don't give more than what is asked for.
- Think carefully as you speak. A 15-minute interview could be edited down to a 15-second sound bite. Is it what you want repeated?
- Don't ever mislead. Always provide the truth and nothing but the truth.
- Nothing is "off the record." Treat any statement as if it will be used publicly—even if the reporter says it is "off the record."

- Remember to speak plainly and avoid using acronyms or church language unfamiliar to non-United Methodists (e.g. CFA, Discipline)
- Summarize your response after delivering it.
- Let the media know you are available for further questions at a later time.

HOUSEKEEPING DETAILS TO REMEMBER:

Team members and members of the support staff should document all conversations relating to the crisis as well as keep a log of all media contacts, statements issued and developments in the situation.

The Communications Department will notify clergy and laity in the conference, via e-mail or letter if the situation, merits.

The Director of Communications will provide a copy of the Crisis Plan to all new District Superintendents and staff members and brief them on the contents of the plan.

Following a crisis, the CMT, when possible, will meet to review how the crisis unfolded and how it was handled.

THE TEAM WILL CONSIDER:

- What went well; What missteps were made
- What problems could have been foreseen or avoided
- What adjustments in the crisis management plan are indicated
- What loose ends need to be tied up.

MEDIA PROCEDURES FOR
CHURCH, CONFERENCE AND DISTRICT STAFF

HANDLING TELEPHONE CALLS FROM REPORTERS

- Take a written message. Don't transfer to voice mail without taking a message.
- Get reporter's name, media outlet, direct phone number (cell if possible), and deadline.
- Ask for topic of story. Explain that the Conference Director of Communications will return the call. (This procedure should be followed for all inquires that could potentially effect the United Methodist Church)
- Do not answer any questions. Be polite, but firm. Complete a Media Inquiry Sheet for each call.
- Sample "hold response": "I want to make sure we give you the most accurate and up-to-date information. Our Director of Communications can best help you. If you give me your contact information, deadline and topic you are calling

about, I will have him return your call as soon as possible."

HANDLING REPORTERS ON-SITE

- Refer questions to the Conference Director of Communications or Director of Connectional Ministries.
- Be polite, but firm. Don't be hostile.
- Don't give your personal opinion.
- Don't speak "off the record."
- Don't use the term "no comment."

HANDLING CASUAL CONVERSATIONS OR QUESTIONS ABOUT A CRISIS

- Don't speculate, repeat unconfirmed information or express personal opinions.
- Don't feel as if you have to answer questions.
- Sample Response: I know that the Bishop and Cabinet have been addressing the matter and they will make a statement if and when there is anything to report."

Finally, grace abounds throughout the process.

Pause at any time to take a breath. There is never a need to panic.

Anything said or done in good faith that has negative implications will be forgiven.

Errors and missteps need to be accurately reported to the Crisis Management Team so it can be prepared to issue corrections and/or respond accordingly.

At every stage, the Crisis Management Team will welcome further reporting and hearing of mistakes and errors to be corrected.

MEDIA INQUIRY LOG SHEET

CLICK ON THE LINK ABOVE TO DOWNLOAD
COPY OF THIS FORM

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

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