

# THE MEDIA & YOUR CHURCH



Tips, Best Practices & Crisis Communications

# CRISIS CAN TAKE MANY FORMS

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- Vandalism or a devastating fire

*Vandalism at Hillsborough UCC in NC, Little River in VA  
Fires at UCC Church in Berkeley, CA, another in Saco, ME*

## CRISIS CAN TAKE MANY FORMS

- Vandalism or a devastating fire
- Natural disaster

*Last year's flooding in the Lumberton area*

*Recent hurricanes in TX, FL, PR and fires out west*

## CRISIS CAN TAKE MANY FORMS

- Vandalism or a devastating fire
- Natural disaster
- A shooting in your community

*Las Vegas, Orlando, Newtown, Blacksburg, the list goes on...*

## CRISIS CAN TAKE MANY FORMS

- Vandalism or a devastating fire
- Natural disaster
- A shooting in your community
- An accusation affecting your ministry  
*Embezzlement, sexual harrassment, abuse*

## CRISIS CAN TAKE MANY FORMS

- Vandalism or a devastating fire
- Natural disaster
- A shooting in your community
- An accusation affecting your ministry
- A public event or incident involving your people  
*Moral Mondays, immigration actions, environmental protests*  
*The departure of Pastor Rob Lee from Bethany UCC (WS)*

# THREE ESSENTIAL STRATEGIES



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- Be prepared

Plan ahead — consider all the possibilities and make a plan

## THREE ESSENTIAL STRATEGIES

- Be prepared
- Respond quickly

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Speed is key —  
Acknowledge the issue  
Let people know you'll be providing updates as you gather details

## THREE ESSENTIAL STRATEGIES

- Be prepared
- Respond quickly
- Be responsibly transparent

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*(Debra Davenport, Purdue University: “The 3 Most Effective Crisis Communication Strategies”)*

Tell the truth. Avoid pointing fingers or making blanket statements.  
Be transparent without accepting culpability.

# THE ESSENTIALS, EXPANDED

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Recent experience of Bethany UCC in Winston-Salem offers a reminder to plan ahead

# BE PREPARED!

- Make a plan for how you'll communicate in a crisis

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- At a minimum, be prepared to issue a statement
- Always prepare someone to respond directly to media inquiries
- Plan to share an appropriate level of information.

# BE PREPARED!

- Make a plan for how you'll communicate in a crisis
- Draft your talking points in advance

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- Imagine the worst and discuss how you want to respond **before** an issue arises
- If your church has accepted a potential risk, prepare talking points for the worst case scenario.
  - hiring/calling individuals, for example, with a criminal background
  - Inviting into membership someone registered as a sex offender
- Invite the individual to participate in development of your talking points

## BE PREPARED! RESPOND QUICKLY!

- Make a plan for how you'll communicate in a crisis
- Draft your talking points in advance
- Forward church calls or check your answering machine often

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- Make sure the media (and others) can reach you!
- Add an emergency contact to your website/facebook, or be sure someone can update on-the-fly

## BE PREPARED! RESPOND QUICKLY!

- Make a plan for how you'll communicate in a crisis
- Draft your talking points in advance
- Forward church calls or check your answering machine often
- Respond to the media

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- Respond to media calls quickly — even if you just ask for deadline information and promise a response.
- The failure to communicate with the media often creates a bigger problem.
- Members of the media are simply doing their job, and they're going to write a story.
- Be sure *your* perspective is heard.



## BE PREPARED! RESPOND QUICKLY! BE TRANSPARENT!

- Make a plan for how you'll communicate in a crisis
- Draft your talking points in advance
- Forward church calls or check your answering machine often
- Respond to the media
- Never tell a reporter you have "no comment"

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- Always tell reporters you'll get back to them or that you'll have the right person call them.
- Ask about their deadline
- Follow up on any promises you make to a reporter!

## BE PREPARED! RESPOND QUICKLY! BE TRANSPARENT!

- Make a plan for how you'll communicate in a crisis
- Draft your talking points in advance
- Forward church calls or check your answering machine often
- Respond to the media
- Never tell a reporter you have “no comment”
- Avoid speaking “off the record”

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- While most reporters will honor a request to speak “off the record,” you must make the request *in advance* of making the comment!
- Speak as if your remarks may show up somewhere

# TIPS & BEST PRACTICES

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- Determine in advance who will talk to the media

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- Make sure everyone knows who is authorized to talk to the media.
- Anyone reached by the media should pass along the designated person's contact info — nothing more.
- If a reporter keeps trying to ask questions, just repeat, "I'll ask the right person get in touch with you very soon."

## TIPS & BEST PRACTICES

- Determine in advance who will talk to the media
- Develop & practice your talking points

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- *Talking points should be used by the designated contacts*
- Know the message you want to convey.
- Prepare in advance your basic response on subjects that could generate media inquiries
  - social justice positions
  - community events

## TIPS & BEST PRACTICES

- Determine in advance who will talk to the media
- Develop & practice your talking points
- Practice deflecting questions you don't want to answer

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- You aren't obligated to answer every question you're asked.
- Say, "That's an interesting question," then move to one of your talking points.
- You can also say you'd prefer not to answer the question.

## TIPS & BEST PRACTICES

- Determine in advance who will talk to the media
- Develop & practice your talking points
- Practice deflecting questions you don't want to answer
- Know your elevator speech

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- An elevator speech describes your church in 45-60 seconds.
- Everyone should know the elevator speech.
- Elevator speech may resemble your final press release paragraph

# CONTACT THE ASSOCIATION!

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- The Western NC Association leadership can provide support and expertise as you navigate the challenges you face should a crisis occur.
- Example: Press release about Bethany went out on Association letterhead, and Jerry Rhyne spoke to the media on behalf of Bethany