



THE EPISCOPAL
DIOCESE OF

FORT WORTH

Crisis Communication

What is a crisis?

It's a significant threat to your church operations that can have negative consequences if not handled properly.

This can range from a tornado to a crime being committed by an ordained or lay employee or member to a lawsuit to attacks from a disgruntled person on social media.



In crisis management, the threat is the potential damage a crisis can inflict on a church, its members, a diocese, and The Episcopal Church.

A crisis can create three related threats:

- public safety
- financial loss
- reputation loss

Handle threats sequentially

- Effective crisis management handles threats sequentially. The primary concern in a crisis has to be public safety.
- Reputation and financial concerns are considered **AFTER** public safety has been remedied.

Three phases

As a process, crisis management is not just one thing. It has three phases:

- Pre-crisis
- Crisis response
- Post-crisis

Pre-Crisis Phase

The pre-crisis phase is concerned with prevention and preparation – reducing known risks that could lead to a crisis. In short - risk management.

Preparation involves:

- creating the crisis management plan
- selecting and training the crisis management team
- conducting exercises to test the crisis management plan and crisis management team.

Organizations are better able to handle crises when they:

- (1) have a crisis management plan that is updated at least annually
- (2) have a designated crisis management team
- (3) conduct exercises to test the plans and teams at least annually
- (4) pre-draft some crisis messages.

And last but not least, have a strong faith foundation.

CRISIS MANAGEMENT PLAN

A crisis management plan (CMP) is a reference tool, not a blueprint. A CMP is not a step-by-step guide to how to manage a crisis.

A CMP provides:

- lists of key contact information
- reminders of what typically should be done in a crisis
- List of assigned roles/responsibilities

Training and sample plans

Episcopal Relief and Development

<https://www.episcopalrelief.org/press-and-resources/resource-library/>

Episcopal Diocese of Texas

<https://www.epicenter.org/parish-emergency-planning-guide/>



Crisis Management Team

In general, the crisis response team members will come from these broad areas:

Communication, human resources (clergy, senior wardens), legal, security, operations (junior wardens), finance

But composition will vary based on the nature of the crisis. For instance, information technology would be required if the crisis involved the computer system.

Time is saved because the team has already decided on who will do the basic tasks required in a crisis, and if they regularly test it.



Name a spokesperson

One of the most important decisions you will make is who will be the church spokesperson. Choose one person and a backup.

This should not be the rector in most cases, because she or he will be busy with pastoral care.

The senior warden is a good choice, if he or she is well informed, well spoken and is a non-anxious presence.



Crisis media training

1. Avoid the phrase “no comment” because people think it means the church is guilty and trying to hide something. Be as honest as you can be while preserving privacy concerns.

2. Present information clearly by avoiding jargon or Episcopospeak. Lack of clarity makes people think the organization is purposefully being confusing in order to hide something.



Crisis media training (2)

3. Appear pleasant and non-anxious on camera by avoiding nervous habits that people interpret as deception. A spokesperson needs to have strong eye contact, limited disfluencies such as “uhms” or “uhs”, and avoid distracting nervous gestures such as fidgeting or pacing.

Crisis media training (3)

4. Brief all potential spokespersons on the latest crisis information and the key message points the organization is trying to convey to the media, the public, and church members.

Keep your spokesperson and the backup in the loop at ALL times.

Have regular briefing meetings so EVERYONE on the Crisis Management Team is updated and is working off the same information. The key is for everyone to speak with one voice, so if the nature of the crisis calls for more than one person speaking, they are ALL telling the same basic story.

Pray together regularly.



Crisis media training (4)

Get some training in dealing with the news media.
Your diocesan staff can help with that.



Crisis Response

This is what you say and do after the crisis hits. This response has two parts.

(1) the initial crisis response

(1) reputation repair and amendment of behavior intentions

Initial Crisis Response: The Three BEs

BE quick

BE accurate

BE consistent



Be Quick

The first thing you do is alert the bishop and the canon that a crisis is unfolding. They have resources to help you.

Provide a response in the first hour after the crisis occurs.
Why?

So that you control the narrative. Crises produce an information vacuum. The media want to fill that vacuum. Make sure it's your narrative they hear first. Because if it's not, someone else will fill that vacuum.

Silence is never a good communication strategy. It lets other people control the story and makes you look unprepared and inept.



Be Quick 2

Position your spokesperson as a reliable informed source for the media.

This means you must **NEVER** lie to the media. They aren't stupid.

If you make a mistake, own it, correct it quickly and move on.



Be Quick 3

Use the Internet. Create a landing page on your website and devote it to information related to the crisis. Mirror that information on your church Facebook page. Delegate someone skilled in this area to handle this, and make them part of your Crisis Response Team so they are in the loop at all times. Never post different information on different sites.



Be Quick 4

Use social media to deliver accurate information quickly. Brand it with your logo or church name consistently, so people know it's from you.

Monitor social media, whether or not your church has a Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook account.



Be Quick 5

Include staff, vestry, and congregation members in your initial response. Do this the best way possible for your congregation – email blast, Facebook post, Twitter.

You must give them the chance to hear from you at the same time the news media does.



Be Quick 6

When the crisis results in serious injuries or deaths, be sure to express concern and sympathy for the victims. Offer prayers and pastoral care.

Crisis management must include stress and trauma counseling for employees and other victims.



Be Quick

Negative comments on social media

Don't leave negative comments on social media just sitting there.

Corporate communication consultant Justin Dean suggest using **LATTE**:
Listen, Acknowledge, Thank, Take Action,
and **Encourage**.



Be Quick Apologies?

Be cautious about making **too swift of an apology**. It can come across as disingenuous and automated, qualities that can stir, rather than still, a person's furor. If you do make an apology, make sure it **IS** an apology, heartfelt and real.



Post Crisis Phase

In the post-crisis phase, the church is returning to business as usual. The crisis is no longer the focal point of the leadership's attention but still requires some attention.

Reputation repair may be continued or initiated during this phase. It is essential that this effort be based in truth and integrity.



Post Crisis 2

This is when follow-up communication is vital.

1. If crisis managers have promised to provide additional information during the crisis phase, they must deliver on those informational promises or risk losing the trust of publics wanting the information.
2. The church needs to release updates on the recovery process, corrective actions, and/or investigations of the crisis. The amount of follow-up communication required depends on the amount of information promised during the crisis and the length of time it takes to complete the recovery process.



Post Crisis 3

Short-circuit parking-lot conversations.

Make sure to deliver updated messages to congregants, vestry, staff, and other publics via all means possible -- phones, text messages, voice messages, and e-mail. Personal e-mails and phone calls can be used too. Keep reliable information flowing. It helps stop rumors and gossip.



Post Crisis 4

As soon as it's feasible, begin having evaluation meetings to learn from the crisis experience.

Analyze the crisis management effort for lessons and integrate those lessons in to the organization's crisis management system.

