



## step-by-step

Practical strategies to protect your ministry

# Communicating in a Crisis

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## OVERVIEW

# Simple Guide for Communicating in a Crisis

Knowing what to say—and where to say it.

by Tyler Charles

By definition, a crisis could be anything that disrupts church life. It could be something internal—such as a budget shortfall—that only needs to be communicated to those within the church. Or it could be something as serious as a public scandal or allegations against the church, which will require dealing with the media—and, at times, responding to negative media coverage.

Here are some basic tips for each of those three types of crisis communication.

## Communicating a Crisis to your Church

- *Understand who is communicating the message.* Whatever the situation may be, clear communication is the best tool for addressing it. Nothing is more detrimental than multiple voices offering conflicting information. As a leadership team, determine who will communicate the message, then work together to determine what needs to be said and who needs to hear it.
- *Understand how the message is being communicated.* Maybe you will choose to address the crisis from the pulpit. If it only affects a portion of the church—for example, nursery workers and those with children in the nursery—then a special meeting might be a better option. But whenever and however you choose to address the crisis, don't respond to emails or voicemails asking about the matter prior to the meeting. Doing so will start the rumor mill, and much like the game of telephone, it won't be long before the message is garbled.
- *Email—if you have to.* Unlike a meeting, email communication doesn't allow for those impacted to ask questions and process the information as a group. This also robs the leaders of the opportunity to gauge response and assuage the fears of those affected. But the upside to email is that it's quick; nothing is going to get the message out faster. If you need to communicate quickly, email is a viable option, but you should still consider scheduling a follow-up meeting with time for discussion.

### Communicating a Crisis through the Media

- *Call your lawyer first.* If the crisis is serious enough to attract media attention, then it's significant—and the last thing you want to do is make it worse by saying something ill-advised. Your lawyer can counsel you on issues about liability and he can also help you construct an appropriate and timely public statement.
- *Make a statement.* Choose a spokesperson, and have him read the public statement (which your lawyer helped you create). Make sure you communicate that you are aware of the crisis (whatever it may be) and you are taking appropriate steps. The statement doesn't need to be (nor *should* it be) too specific. Save the specifics for those directly involved.
- *Answer questions—or don't.* After reading your statement, you may want to answer questions from the media. Depending on the severity of the situation (for example, if there's any type of criminal investigation taking place), it might be wise to decline comment. Again, allow your attorney to advise you on the best course of action.
- *Post your statement online.* Use the church website—and a blog, if you have one—to share your statement. The important thing is to communicate consistently.

### Responding to Negative Publicity—within the Church and in the Media

- *Respond only when necessary.* As difficult as it might be, if your church did something (or a member of the church staff did something) to merit negative publicity, you will have to take some heat from the media. If the news stories are accurate, there is only so much you can say. But if inaccurate information is presented, or if you feel it's necessary to reiterate that you are taking appropriate steps to right the wrong, consult with your lawyer about the best response.
- *Bring your church together.* If your church is drawing significant media attention, then the church members need to be “in the loop.” They need to feel confident that their leaders are in control of the situation. Schedule meetings. Allow church members to ask questions. When the crisis is already full-blown, the last thing you want to do is compound the problem by losing trust (or members) within the church.
- *Be ready to move on.* When interest in the crisis starts to dwindle, don't continue to harp on it. The church will be ready to move on, and at this point, continued assurances might have an opposite effect—causing concern or frustration within the church. As a leadership team, you need to carry your church through the crisis. Focus on the church's vision for the future. Pursue that vision, and don't look back.

ASSESSMENT

## What Do You Want Me to Say?

Is your church prepared to communicate a crisis?

by Tyler Charles

*“We never thought this would happen to us.”*

If a crisis strikes your church, this is what you don’t want to say. To avoid being caught completely off guard, it’s important for church leaders to discuss potential crises that could affect them and to create a strategy for communicating in the wake of any crisis.

Use this assessment to determine how prepared your church is—and to discover what else you can do to be ready to communicate a crisis.

Our church leaders spend time discussing how we would respond to a crisis.

True  False

Our church leaders are very aware of the potential crises we might face.

True  False

We formed a crisis response team—in case we ever need them.

True  False

We are prepared to communicate a crisis through multiple channels.

True  False

We know who our spokesperson would be if we needed to address a crisis to the media.

True  False

We are prepared to use technology (ie. Facebook, Twitter, church website, or blog) as part of our crisis communication strategy.

True  False

In the event of a lawsuit or a criminal investigation, we are aware of what we should and shouldn’t communicate.

True  False

In the event of a significant crisis, protecting the public perception of our church would be our top priority.

True  False

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In the event of a significant crisis, caring for the emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being of our church members would be our top priority.

True  False

Bad publicity can't necessarily be avoided, but we've done all we can to prepare a communication strategy in the event of a crisis.

True  False

HOW TO

## Dealing with the Media During a Crisis

Help your church by implementing “media strategy” before a crisis.

Imagine that a parent accuses your nursery worker of child molestation or a parishioner sues for personal injury arising out of a disciplinary measure. Handling such events will be difficult enough. Add the dimension of dealing with the media, and your task becomes even more challenging.

### Contact Your Insurer

The first step in any crisis is to report the incident to your insurance agent immediately, no matter the severity of the claim.

### Control Your Message

When dealing with the media:

- *Avoid extremes.* Some pastors seek coverage, hoping to appear on every newscast, while others padlock their churches’ front doors, never to be found.
- *Develop a response other than “no comment.”* Issue a brief statement like this: “The safety and well-being of our youth is extremely important to our ministry. We are cooperating with the authorities in their investigation, and any comments made before the investigation is complete would be premature.”
- *Prepare a written statement for distribution* with the help of your attorney.
- *Select a central spokesperson* through whom all messages are communicated. If that person appears caring and concerned, your church will be perceived as such.
- *Anticipate questions* reporters will ask. Determine ahead of time what you will say and what you won’t or can’t say.
- *Have your attorney present* at news conferences, if possible.
- *Speak in sound bites*—emphasize key points made in the news release, and don’t deviate from them.
- *Maintain an open mind and a good attitude* about dealing with the media.

This article originally appeared at [BrotherhoodMutual.com](http://BrotherhoodMutual.com). Used with permission.

**Thought Provokers:**

- How can we prepare our staff to communicate with the media in a crisis situation?
- Have we discussed who the spokesperson should be in advance in the event of a crisis?

HOW TO

## Responding to Negative Coverage in the Media

Tips from two church communications professionals.

by Kevin D. Hendricks

*On February 4, 2010, a local television station ran a story about Ed Young and Fellowship Church in Grapevine, Texas, where he leads. The piece, citing anonymous former staff members, among others, suggests Young leads a lavish lifestyle. Young responded that same day through a post entitled “No Secrets” on his blog, then addressed it from the pulpit on February 8.*

*Kevin Hendricks from [ChurchMarketingSucks.com](http://ChurchMarketingSucks.com), the blog for the nonprofit Center for Church Communication, took the opportunity to ask a bigger question—when a church faces negative coverage in the media, how should it respond? Below is an excerpt of the interview Hendricks did with Kem Meyer, the communications director at Granger Community Church in Indiana, and Kent Shaffer, the founder of Church Relevance. Both are board members for the Center for Church Communication.*

### Kevin Hendricks

If your church were attacked in the local media, how would you respond?

### Kem Meyer

When faced with criticism and accusations, it’s a fine response line between too little (e.g., ignore it, act like it’s not there) and too much (e.g., hijack the home page, defensively counterpoint every single point). Every circumstance needs to be looked at individually; no two situations are exactly the same. There are many variables at play: proximity, topic, source, etc. And each of these variables needs to be considered and weighed appropriately. But regardless of how any of that shakes out, here are a couple of bullets that apply to every situation:

***Full disclosure is always the best policy.*** When there is nothing to hide, a direct answer to a direct question is the way to go. The goal isn’t to get agreement on the answer, but to answer the question unapologetically. It reinforces the message “there is no cover-up here. It is what it is.” In this case, it would be great for someone to stand up and say “Yes, we own a plane, and this is why we own the plane, and this is how we pay for it, yada yada...” Without information—people just make up their own truth. And then they start to believe it.

***It’s important to listen to the chatter.*** If there were a report about my senior pastor, I would make sure we watched the report—in full—as a senior management team. It’s

responsible to listen to what people are saying in public spaces about your church and leaders. It's not a self-centered, off-mission indulgence, but a window to the full picture. What we learn when we listen—good and bad—is the only way to discover the full picture about public perception (which is *their* reality). Sometimes we discover that the picture we're drawing isn't telling the story we think it is and we get a chance to course correct. We still are in control of which audiences we respond to and which to absorb, but without looking through that window—we risk making decisions on incomplete or inaccurate information about ourselves.

### **Kent Shaffer**

In sports there is an expression, “You have to be good enough to beat the referee.” You have to be above reproach and go the extra mile to avoid the appearance of foul play. Both in sports and the limelight, people's perceptions often trump the reality of a star's actions and motives.

People are funny when it comes to religion and money...sadly, because of religion's long history of financial abuse. Depending on your culture, theology and lifestyle, lavishness in the church may be an abomination or a way to show respect to God and one's pastor.

I recommend that churches, particularly influential ones, strive to be above reproach. Avoid letting your financial behavior become an obstacle that turns some people off to Christ. Join the **Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability**. Have personal accountability partners. Give generously and then give some more.

If your church comes under fire for perceived financial irresponsibility, address it immediately, honestly, and humbly. Seek council, and if you did something wrong, publicly apologize and commit to correct the wrongs (much like Toyota is doing with their recalls). Don't ignore the media or you will likely appear guilty even though that may be far, far from the truth. Old school public relations would ignore bad publicity or just shout louder, but in today's wired world where almost anyone can have a platform (i.e., Twitter, blogs, Facebook, etc.), the best solution is to authentically engage your accusers through meaningful conversations online and offline.

Public relations that engages people doesn't make the problem disappear or get everyone to think just like you. But it is real, honest, undeniable, and most importantly, it causes people to respect you (even if they hate you). It is not easy. And there is no perfect formula to follow. But to some degree you should be putting forth effort for a few weeks via multiple channels to share the truth from your side of the story.

**This article originally appeared on [TheYourChurchBlog.com](http://TheYourChurchBlog.com)**

### Thought Provokers

- What can we take away from this interview about responding to negative publicity?
- How well could we—if the need arose—use resources like Twitter, Facebook, or a blog to respond to negative publicity?
- Are we striving to be above reproach as a church? Is there anything we could do to improve?

HOW TO

## Using Communication Strategies

Planning communication strategies for a potential traumatic incident.

Communicating with members of your congregation or ministry will be critical to your ability to deal with a traumatic incident and its aftermath.

Perhaps you will never have to confront such a situation, but church leaders must be intentional in helping members fully understand how they intend to protect members, guests, and their families should such an incident happen on the church's premises.

Effective communication will be key to gathering the congregation, staff, and ministry worker support you will need to help prevent or deal with a traumatic incident at your church.

### Pre-Incident Communication

The time to begin communicating is before you experience a traumatic incident. While it may be impossible to foresee every traumatic event that your ministry may face, it's far better to have a communication plan in place before a threat develops than to have to "make it up as you go" in the midst of a threat. Take time to develop an incident response plan.

Once you have the incident response strategy in place, develop a schedule for ongoing communication. Keep the members of your organization updated with any changes in the program—even if they are not directly involved.

Regular communication also will help you maintain a high level of sensitivity to potential traumatic incidents. That awareness can be a catalyst in providing a safe environment at all times.

### Communication During the Incident

By its very nature, a sudden life-threatening situation involving large groups of people will tend to create some degree of chaos. By planning out a communication approach in advance, however, the level of chaos can be minimized.

If a threatening situation should develop, determine in advance how you will communicate to people throughout the building and grounds. If your building doesn't currently have a public address system that reaches all rooms within your facility and outdoor areas, consider having one installed.

Determine in advance who will make announcements to evacuate the building or to lock down a children's wing. Also determine who will contact law enforcement authorities as soon as a threat is recognized. Make sure you have back-ups in place in case the primary communicator isn't present or is unable to carry out his or her duties.

### Post-Incident Communication

The following framework will help you create an effective communication plan to initiate after a traumatic incident has occurred.

**1. Who is your audience?** *Identify potential groups that need to receive your communication.*

**Be specific.** There are a number of different groups in your congregation. You are best served when you have a clear understanding of each audience so you can customize your communications to their needs. Consider all audiences that have access to your facilities and participate in your church's programs and activities.

Potential audiences include:

- Church leaders (elders, church board, trustees, administrators).
- Ministerial staff.
- Non-ministerial staff, including administrative, janitorial, and volunteer staff.
- Children's and youth ministers.
- Church school and pre-school teachers and staff members.
- Paid and volunteer ministry supervisors, program coordinators, and workers.
- Parents, guardians.
- Members and regularly attending non-members.
- Vendors (janitorial, cafeteria, security).
- The media.

**2. What do I tell them?** *Develop informational messages customized for each audience.* Most of your communication/education efforts will include the same information, but what you emphasize or provide in greater detail will depend on the potential audience.

Those who will be working in any emergency capacity—your emergency response team, for example—will need specific, detailed information so they can function effectively when the need arises. The congregation, in general, needs to know about the program, its benefits, and as much information as necessary to keep themselves safe.

While developing your communication/education plan, you also may want to consult with your attorney. By doing so, you will be able to identify any state or local legal requirements that you will need to address in your communications.

General information to provide:

- Background information about the potential for a traumatic incident.
- Purpose of the program.
- Benefits of the program.
- Procedures to be followed and other protections the program provides for groups in the church, especially children, the elderly, and those with disabilities.

**3. How do I tell them?** *Use a variety of communication/education channels.* Each church or related ministry usually has several established avenues of communicating with their organization.

Use as many means as possible to inform your congregation, staff, and ministry workers about how it will be implemented and maintained in your church. Develop other communication methods, as needed.

Consider these possible communication methods:

- In-person, small group presentations—to church leadership, staff, ministry workers, parents.
- Letters to members of the congregation, ministry workers, parents.
- Special meetings with parents and ministry workers.
- Pulpit announcements/presentations.
- Congregational meetings.
- Specially developed brochures, flyers.
- Church bulletin.
- Church newsletter.
- Church website.
- Posters, strategically placed.

Communication is a critical element in any traumatic incident response. Accordingly, be sure to plan in advance what will be conveyed before, during, and after the unexpected occurs.

This article originally appeared at [BrotherhoodMutual.com](http://BrotherhoodMutual.com). Used with permission.

### Thought Provokers

- Do we have an up-to-date plan for communicating during a crisis?
- Have we communicated this plan effectively to our leaders and church members?
- What forms of communication are we prepared to use in the event of a crisis? Are we overlooking other options?

HOW TO

## Ready for a Crisis

**How prepared is your church?***by Mike Bayer*

*Scene 1:* It's Sunday morning and the worship service is in progress when someone walks up to the pastor and hands him a piece of paper. The note says, "We've just received a bomb threat."

*Scene 2:* Arriving at the church office one morning, you are greeted by two detectives from the local police department. One tells you, "Pastor, we've just arrested your associate pastor on a child molestation charge."

*Scene 3:* On Saturday morning, you're drinking a cup of coffee and scanning the newspaper when you notice your church's name in a story. To your dismay, the headline reads: "Food Poisoning Breaks Out After Church Potluck."

If you're saying that couldn't happen to your church, think again. These are all accounts of what really happened to churches. And to their chagrin, those churches and their pastoral staffs were caught unprepared.

### What to Do with a Bomb Threat

Terry White was the church administrator at Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, when their church received a bomb threat. "We had to evacuate the church building," White says. "I quickly discovered that we had no idea how to do it in an orderly way."

In the aftermath of the bomb scare, White, who is now vice president of communications for Prison Fellowship Ministries, wrote an emergency plan for the church. The document begins, "When the alarm goes off—," then proceeds with these instructions:

1. The pastor tells the congregation which exits to use, then gives instructions to parents with children in classes on how they should proceed.
2. Specified people are told to evacuate elderly or wheelchair-bound members.
3. Certain people are instructed to check all restrooms and classrooms to make sure everyone is out of the church facility.
4. The congregation is given instructions about fire alarms, the fire-control panel, and other fire-related devices. Specified people are also given appropriate steps to shut down

any air-handling systems, such as heating and air conditioning.

5. Teachers and child-care workers are given instructions on how to evacuate their classrooms and where to go.

Wooddale Church's emergency plan was written for a fire or bomb threat, but it also includes instructions on what the congregation should do in case of a tornado.

### Test the Plan

Writing a plan isn't enough. People also have to practice carrying it out. "You have to test it," White says. One of the best ways to do that, he suggests, is to do an emergency evacuation drill during or immediately after a morning service. "You might want to do this during National Fire Prevention Week, usually in October," White says.

Many churches, such as Calvary Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, recognize the need for giving their members advance instructions on how to proceed in case of an emergency. Every hymn rack at Calvary Church includes a brochure titled "What To Do," covering dangerous weather situations, natural disasters, and fire alarms.

### Anticipate Crises

A church may face other disasters that can be just as scary as fire or a bomb threat. According to Mark DeMoss, president of the DeMoss Group, a Duluth, Georgia-based public relations firm that works with churches and Christian organizations, here are some crises your church might want to prepare for:

1. Death, disability, or chronic illness of the pastor.
2. A major lawsuit against the church, such as a legal challenge of a bequest or donation. A claim against the church resulting from a church bus accident or the use of another church-owned vehicle.
3. Public controversy involving the church, including demonstrations against the church, interruption of church services, harassment of members or staff, and resulting media attention.
4. Perceived or real departure from orthodoxy.
5. Financial or general mismanagement, including the misuse of church funds, food poisoning, or negligence resulting in injury or death.
6. Charges of racial prejudice, sexual harassment, or criminal activity involving the church or church staff.

To prepare for such emergencies, a church board should meet at least once a year for discussion and planning, DeMoss says. He suggests that the board list all possible crises that might hit the church, then rank them in order of probability. They ought to discuss factors such as the age and health of the pastor, sensitive issues that the church or pastor are involved in, location of the church, and legal exposure of the church.

The key here is to plan before a crisis happens—not after. Jack Buttram, who heads his own Greenville, South Carolina-based public affairs consulting firm for churches, can't stress that enough. "Until you've been through it, you cannot believe how difficult it is to make up your plan while things are coming apart at the seams," Buttram says.

### A Plan for Any Emergency

Regardless of the nature of the crisis, a church must respond quickly. Some of the first steps a church should take when faced with just about any emergency are to:

1. Convene a meeting of key church staff and other leaders to discuss the situation.
2. Quickly gather all information available from reliable sources; don't get involved with rumors.
3. Determine the scope of the crisis. Will it last one day, one week, or longer? Will it have local, regional, national, or denominational impact? Who will be most affected? Who must be notified first?
4. Make some hard decisions on what to say about the situation. Prepare an official statement for the press or community people who want to know what's going on.
5. Make use of an internal prayer line or church hotline to inform church members of the crisis. You don't want them to hear about it from the press or a next-door neighbor.

### Know What to Say to the Media

A good crisis plan will include a section on how to deal with the media. Nothing can be potentially more destructive than an onslaught of unfavorable news stories. This type of media exposure can influence community opinion of your church for a long time and interfere with your mission.

Mark DeMoss advises churches to head off damaging stories by responding quickly to the media about a crisis. "Depending on the nature of the crisis or impending crisis, you may only have a brief time to get control of the situation," he says. "The first 24 hours are critical. You must reassure the public and the congregation, and restore trust in the church and its staff."

Since most pastors and congregations are not accustomed to dealing with the media, they should get some training in how to do that. “If you can only do one thing, get some media training for your spokesperson,” says Jack Buttram, a professional news person who formerly served on the White House staff. “Churches should give some consideration to training someone in addition to the pastor.”

DeMoss recommends that smaller churches enlist the help of church members or friends who are human resource, media, or public relations professionals. “Having a fresh set of eyes look over your plan and play the role of a hostile reporter can be very useful,” Buttram says. Larger churches might consider hiring a public affairs or public relations firm to write a crisis plan and provide media training for its spokespersons.

A crisis plan should also include instructions on how to communicate information to church members and others who may be involved. Since the church office is what most people will call for information, the plan should include instructions for anyone who answers the church phone.

### Do It Now

Discussing and planning for all the possible crises that could happen in your church may not be pleasant. However, being prepared for a crisis may enable you to prevent one from actually occurring. At the very least, it will help minimize its potentially damaging effects.

*Mike Bayer is senior pastor of South Coast Christian Assembly Church and president of Mike Bayer Public Relations in Laguna Beach, California.*

This article originally appeared in YOUR CHURCH.

### Thought Provokers

- What crises are we adequately prepared to handle?
- For what crises do we need to be better prepared?
- What do we need to do now?

FOR CHURCH LEADERS

## Drafting a Crisis Team

Put this task force in place today—before the crisis comes.

by Dennis Kasper

Here's what you need to do to create a response team.

**1. Choose your players.** Members need to be mature, well-respected, and able to drop everything to dedicate themselves to the process in times of crisis.

Your team should include:

- a pastor
- a member of the board
- several excellent communicators
- a prayer leader who can direct an intercessory prayer team.

**2. Assign key positions** (one person per position, and only one position per person):

- a chairperson (not the senior pastor)
- a communications spokesperson who is made accessible to the entire congregation for questions and concerns
- liaisons to each involved person or party.

**3. Give the team authority**, and allow them to act quickly:

- to coordinate legal response
- to communicate to the church, the general public, and media
- to design a plan for further investigation
- to set up counseling for those in need.

This article originally appeared in LEADERSHIP JOURNAL.

IT'S TRUE

## Confronted with the Shameful

How one church responded to a serious crisis.

by Mike Woodruff and Dennis Kasper

News stories of child molestation in the church cross our desk with alarming regularity. Recently prominent churches in the Midwest and South have been tragically shaken by allegations of criminal sexual conduct. Because of pending litigation and privacy issues, churches are reluctant to share the details of their experiences.

But *Leadership* came across a story that has run the circuit of accusation, investigation, and resolution. Mike Woodruff obtained permission to write the story of a church on the West Coast that lived through this crisis. As Mike relays the pastor's story, we've interspersed the counsel of Dennis Kasper, an attorney specializing in church crisis management, who comments on the steps necessary in responding to charges of sexual misconduct with a minor.

### The pastor's story:

#### Mike Woodruff

Our youth intern is in jail, two boys are in therapy, and one family has left the church. What started out as the renewal of our middle school ministry ended in shameful tragedy.

I had no indication anything was wrong until the day our 25-year-old youth intern, Roy, asked for a meeting with the pastoral staff. As we gathered on that Wednesday afternoon nearly five years ago, our jaws dropped open and our mouths went dry as Roy began confessing inappropriate—make that horrific—actions, including smoking marijuana with a 15-year-old student and renting a hotel room so the two of them could drink beer and watch R-rated movies.

But the worst was yet to come.

Later that week, Roy was arrested on five felony counts of child molestation. Because the youth in question was a member of our church, and because Roy claimed that the molestation charges were false, we were faced with a complicated crisis. The watchful eye of the press ensured the crisis would be public.

### The attorney's analysis:

#### Dennis Kasper

In such a situation, several concerns must be kept in mind: the initial crisis response, communication, the ensuing investigation, and resolution, including ministry to the involved parties and their families. Each concern is loaded with legal and spiritual ramifications.

Numerous people are involved: the victim, the victim's family, the accused, the accused's family, witnesses, other students and parents involved in the youth group, the church, the authorities, the media, and the community. Prepared leadership, coupled with wise legal counsel, can manage these concerns.

**Woodruff:** Roy came to us on an unpaid internship from our denominational seminary. We welcomed him onto our staff after we had contacted previous employers and run a criminal background check, which he passed.

Roy jumped into the job with great vigor, quickly forming friendships with a number of the kids. He was especially determined to win his way into the lives of those on the fringes. Roy spent the most time with a boy named Jesse, a 15-year-old from a single-parent home, whose mother attended our church.

What happened next depends on whose account you believe. According to Roy, trying to fit into the lives of the youth mushroomed into an unhealthy desire for acceptance. Jesse took advantage of that weakness, manipulating Roy into purchasing cigarettes for him, then providing alcohol, and eventually smoking pot with him. Roy claims he was motivated solely by a desire to befriend Jesse and see him turn his life around. He described a desperate attempt to shake Jesse loose from the grip of drug use.

"Jesse, I'd do anything to get you off of drugs."

"Okay, I'll quit. Just smoke pot with me one time, and I'll quit."

Roy did.

When Jesse didn't keep the promise to stop doing drugs, Roy confronted him. "Look, Jesse, I can't keep quiet about this. You're hurting yourself. I'm going to have to bring your mom and the other pastors into this."

"If you do," Roy claimed Jesse said, "I'll tell them you smoked pot." Right then Roy realized his mistakes were going to mean trouble.

Roy claims he was blackmailed by Jesse and duped into a downward spiral of poor

## Communicating in a Crisis | Confronted with the Shameful

decisions until the gravity of the situation forced him to confess. “I didn’t feel like I had a choice,” says Roy. “Things were out of control. I was so sick of what was going on, but I didn’t see a way out.”

The events culminated when Roy—who was boarding with someone from the church—rented a hotel room as a “safe” place to drink with the youth. During their second drinking party they also watched movies with graphic sex scenes. Roy claims Jesse was drunk and began to masturbate. When he couldn’t talk Jesse out of it, Roy locked himself in the bathroom for an hour.

“I was shaking and sweating and throwing up,” claims Roy. “I knew things were over, one way or the other.”

Two days later, Roy asked for the meeting that shocked our staff.

Jesse’s account is considerably more sordid, and involves charges of molestation. It suggests Roy was a crafty manipulator who was grooming Jesse for a homosexual encounter from the beginning.

**Kasper:** What do you do in this situation? Given the conflicting accounts, how do you juggle lawyers, reporters, counselors, gossips, victims, an accused staff member, and a church on the side?

The fact is, no one is completely capable of dealing with situations this complicated, this significant, and this demanding of time and resources. For that reason, I urge churches to form a Crisis Response Team. The response team’s job is to move quickly to address all the previously stated concerns in a unified way, while minimizing disruption and damage.

A crisis necessitating a response team doesn’t have to involve sexual misconduct. A crisis is any unplanned event that presents either a significant risk or a significant distraction to the church. By that definition, crises may include natural disasters, accidents, misconduct, strife, and a host of other possibilities.

The Crisis Response Team should be appointed by the pastor and/or board and consist of several key people:

- a member of the pastoral staff (if possible)
- a member of the church governing board
- someone with excellent writing and verbal communications skills
- someone with pastoral care or mental health care skills
- someone with legal or investigative training
- someone with a heart for intercessory prayer

Experience has taught me that this group should not include the entire staff because the pastors’ energy and focus will be demanded elsewhere.

These members need not meet regularly, but must be available to drop everything and meet immediately in time of crisis. Meeting the same day of a crisis, or at the latest the next day, can be crucial. Particularly in misconduct cases, word of the crisis spreads quickly (often through the victim's family), and the law may dictate the church take immediate action.

When activated, the Crisis Response Team should have the authority to make quick and ongoing decisions. They should report regularly during the crisis to the pastor and board.

In the case involving Roy, an impromptu response team was formed out of the available pastoral staff. While this can work, I would recommend pre-selecting, and possibly even pre-training, a group of respected, mature, and level-headed people to fill out the team.

### Crisis response

**Woodruff:** After a quick huddle with the pastoral staff, we called Jesse's mother and accompanied Roy while he shared the "facts" as we now had them. That evening she confronted her son, who offered his completely different account. They immediately asked to meet with us to explain his side of the story.

With the surfacing of molestation allegations, we had no choice but to phone the police.

At the advice of our denominational leaders, we also prepared a statement for the press, notified our insurance company of a possible lawsuit, and prepared a letter to the entire church explaining as much as we could be certain of.

**Kasper:** The church was wise to respond swiftly. With the possible exception of trying to conduct their own investigation, they handled the situation reasonably well and took steps to protect themselves legally.

Several actions are key to handling a crisis well. Having a several-member response team will enable you do these things quickly.

**1. Meet immediately with legal counsel.** It is unlikely someone within the church will be sufficiently trained to handle this kind of situation—consult someone specializing in church crisis management. You will want to specifically discuss issues of how to protect the work of the team under the attorney/client privilege.

**2. Determine if any criminal report is required.** Many states mandate reporting incidents involving minors immediately. Attorney Stephen Chawaga warns, "Failure to take action after hearing of a complaint, or turning a blind eye to misconduct a later investigation reveals, practically guarantees that your church will be sued."

3. **Advise the accused to seek an attorney.** Especially in the case of criminal allegation, the church can have no part in offering the accused what may be construed as legal counsel.
4. **Contact your church's insurance company.** Most church insurance providers protect against certain lawsuits. Just as you would contact your auto insurer in case of accident, contact the church's insurer to guide you through the necessary steps to ensure coverage.
5. **Assign liaisons.** A point person should maintain regular contact and provide pastoral support to the victim and the victim's family. A different person should do the same for the accused.
6. **Develop a plan of communication.** Select a point person to handle communication specifically with the church, the media, the authorities, and the lawyers. Agree upon what, to whom, and how communication will be offered. Generally, the closer a person is to the situation the more detail they need to know.
7. **Develop a plan for further investigation.** A church should not try to investigate the guilt or innocence of the accused. Criminal investigation must be left to the authorities. But it is important for a church to determine if there are any other victims.
8. **Make counseling available.** Prepare, practically and financially, to provide professional counseling for the victims, victims' families, and other affected youths in the program.

### Communication strategy

**Woodruff:** As soon as charges were filed, we began to receive phone calls from local radio stations and newspapers. We had anticipated this. Our staff agreed that only one person would act as the spokesman for the church, and all requests for information would be channeled to him. This helped us avoid issuing contradictory statements and put our best communicator in the spotlight.

We took the stance that the media was a neutral party and that certain questions needed to be answered publicly. Nonetheless, we guarded our words to protect privacy and to avoid issuing opinions or speculation.

On the Sunday following Roy's arrest we spent the entire Sunday school hour in a forum with the church body answering questions about the charges. We needed to squelch rumors and provide as many facts as we could. We held a similar session during youth group later that week.

At each forum I read the prepared statement, which included a summary of the accusations. I informed the congregation of the likelihood of a police investigation and upcoming legal action. I asked them to pray for both parties. Then we opened the forum

for questions.

The silence was thick.

After a long, torturous pause of shuffling bulletins and echoed coughs, the first question came. “Are we vulnerable to a lawsuit?”

“Yes.”

“What are our obligations to the accused?”

That was a harder question. Our primary responsibility had to be to Jesse and his family. It hurt to say it, but we had no obligation to Roy. Our attorney advised us that it’s considered an improper use of charitable funds to defend criminal activity. We recommended to Roy that he get his own legal counsel. So our contact with Roy would be limited.

“What did we do wrong?” someone asked. “How could this happen?”

That was the hardest question of all. We didn’t have any answers. Yet.

**Kasper:** The church handled this situation well. Observe each of their choices: they prepared formal statements, limiting such revelations to fact; public communication was directed to one designated spokesperson; they remembered that both the victim and the accused have certain rights to privacy (for instance, a minor cannot have his identity shared); they sought to stay ahead of the gossip curve by providing facts on a “need to know” basis and quelling speculation; and finally, a method was developed for the church and concerned people to question the response team.

Two further points need addressing. First, do not assume either party is telling the whole truth. Often, a victim isn’t entirely forthcoming. In the effort to protect themselves and avoid blame for certain events, both the victim and the accused may tell only part of the story. A church cannot get caught up in the “he said, she said” game and should avoid all temptations to determine guilt or innocence.

Second, realize those closest to the situation need the most information, while those furthest removed need the least. It is unwise (and sometimes unlawful) to share details with the public. More information needs to be shared with the church, even more with the youth group, and more still with the families involved.

For instance, a media statement may include the fact that there’s been an allegation, that a crisis response team is evaluating appropriate actions, and that the church is offering professional counseling to potential victims—nothing more. The church may be informed additionally of the response team’s names and dates for communication forums. The youth group’s parents will need assurance that actions are being taken to protect their children.

The victim's parents need to know what care and counseling is available to them and their child.

### Investigation

**Woodruff:** Roy's prosecuting attorney later spoke of how we handled the allegation: "The one mistake the church made was in starting to conduct the investigation themselves. Church staff are not prepared for this type of work, and instead of trying to find out what actually happened, they should have immediately called the police. You are free to tell the person that you are going to report them, but you cannot fail to report them just because they claim innocence or state that a false accusation will ruin them."

**Kasper:** A church must never attempt to determine if the accused is guilty of a crime. That's the job of the police. Any attempt to determine guilt puts the church in the precarious position of becoming a witness in a criminal case. When there are criminal allegations, your church's first steps are clearly defined: call your lawyer, call the authorities, and advise the accused to seek his or her own attorney.

There is, however, an important place for investigation in these matters. The investigation's purpose is not to determine guilt. Instead, an investigation should be conducted to determine if other victims are involved, to determine if disciplinary action needs to be taken, and to determine if church procedures need to be changed.

To determine if there are any other victims, I recommend publicizing the provision of mental health care, as victims may be more likely to come forward to get help. It is important to discover who has been affected by the actions in question.

Often, even without being found guilty of a crime, the accused merits discipline (i.e. firing) for violating clear church policy. Occasionally, action needs to be taken against other staff members or volunteers as well. Even as an unpaid intern, Roy could have been fired for committing a crime (providing cigarettes and alcohol to a minor), since that was admitted by all parties. In other cases, even without determining guilt, grounds for firing can be met on the basis of inappropriate advances, unsupervised contact, or wrongful counsel. Formal action should only be taken after consulting your lawyer to avoid violating employment law.

Obviously, an investigation may reveal that the church needs to change its supervision or accountability policies. Perhaps an investigation will reveal the need to redefine or clarify church policy regarding sexual boundaries and misconduct.

Lastly, make sure to coordinate the investigation with your lawyer. You may want to discuss the specific questions being asked of interviewees, how to take and legally protect the notes from those conversations, how to protect the investigators via attorney/client privilege, and how to protect the accused's Fifth Amendment rights.

## Resolution

**Woodruff:** The three months leading up to the trial were tense, to say the least. People constantly wanted updates. A few criticized us for not publicly backing Jesse, but as church leaders we needed to maintain a legal neutrality. I did, however, spend considerable time privately counseling and supporting Jesse's family.

Most of our criticism came from those who thought we weren't doing enough. Jesse's family was angry for not receiving more support from church members. Though we couldn't publicly name Jesse, still his family argued, "Everyone knows by now. Why aren't people reaching out to us?" Roy's family was also angered that we didn't provide financial help with legal fees.

And we faced the lingering question, "How could this happen?"

Our staff eventually determined there were several changes in policy that needed to be made to infuse our youth ministry with more accountability, rules, and supervision.

The church also offered to pay for all of Jesse's family's counseling, but we did not pay for Roy's. Some church members attempted to stay in touch with him, and I prayed with him on several occasions, but knowing I might be subpoenaed, I found it difficult to offer any meaningful care.

At the eleventh hour the prosecution offered to drop all of the child molestation charges if Roy would plead guilty to lesser offenses. The family was not out for vengeance, and they did not want to drag Jesse through a trial that would likely turn nasty. Roy accepted the plea bargain and was sentenced to one year in the local jail.

Remarkably, the entire crisis was weathered without a lawsuit and without any noticeable exodus from the church or the youth program.

**Kasper:** Crises do not simply go away when the storm blows over. Communication and ministry needs continue. The Crisis Response Team should continue to meet and report regularly during the aftermath. The point people assigned to the victim and the accused should continue to meet with their assigned person to keep communication flowing. The families and congregation should receive regular updates. Providing counseling for the victims, witnesses, and their families is essential.

Furthermore, as the situation draws to a close, the team should meet with their attorney to determine what was handled well, and what things need to be done differently, both now and in the future.

Finally, the results of the investigation should prompt decisions and policy changes as

necessary. It may be considered by many a healing balm to know that the church is taking steps to prevent this kind of tragedy from happening again.

**Woodruff:** Like any group that has weathered a storm like this, we examined both the events leading up to the crisis and our response to it. Our staff met to discuss these issues. There were a few things we did right with Roy, actions that prevented the situation from being much worse. But we also made some grievous mistakes that needed to be corrected.

Our largest mistake was allowing Roy to operate with too much autonomy. We had accountability meetings with Roy, thinking that was sufficient supervision, but we were wrong. Roy was still working as an island. We have since realized that he needed active partnership and mentoring that we didn't provide. Roy later confessed, "I can't watch a kid fail. I had a savior complex, and no one ever warned me of the problems that might cause."

We also encountered a faulty assumption with our church insurance policy. We discovered too late that our policy did not cover any of our staff if we faced criminal charges, only civil ones. Roy was forced to pay for his own legal representation, and we were left vulnerable to a lawsuit. We have since committed to reviewing our policies annually.

Finally, our staff affirmed the necessity of conducting background checks, especially on those who work with children. It's likely that our thoroughness with Roy's background check saved us from a lawsuit. Roy's prosecuting attorney later attested, "The church conducted a decent background check on Roy. They reviewed his employment history, and they phoned the police in those states where he had been previously employed to check on any criminal convictions."

It has been nearly five years since Roy first confessed to buying Jesse alcohol. Jesse has been greatly helped by counseling, and though he no longer attends our church, his mother told me, "If he stays with God through all of this, it will be because of your care."

As for Roy, he served his sentence in jail, where he was active in Bible studies and found refuge with God.

He was released after a one year jail term and no longer works in youth ministry.

This article originally appeared in LEADERSHIP JOURNAL.

### Thought Provokers

- How would we respond to a "Roy" on our staff?
- How would we respond to a situation with a "Jesse" in our church?
- Have we done enough to prepare for a crisis like this?

## LEADER'S GUIDE

## Resource Center

Quick tips and recommended resources.

### Tips for Using Articles

Consider these options for using the articles and information in this download:

- Pass the “What Do You Want Me to Say?” assessment around at your next board meeting and have a 15-minute discussion.
- After reading through an article, choose questions to pose at a scheduled meeting and discuss them together.

### Web Resources

Related ChurchSafety.com Downloads:

- [Child Sexual Abuse Response Plan](#)
- [Preparing Your Church for Any Emergency](#)
- [Medical Emergency Preparation](#)
- [Confronting Gun Violence at Church](#)
- [Safe Ways to Handle Your Church's Money](#)

ChurchSafety.com Assessment

- [Is Our Church Ready for Any Emergency?](#)

**ChurchLawToday.com:** A resource and training center for church leaders with a wealth of information on legal, tax, and management issues.

**YourChurchResources.com:** Reference and training material for the risk management issues that affect your church.

- [“Secrets of Effective Communication”](#) Your Church Safety Alert Training

### Books, Kits, and Other Resources

**Crisis Manual for Christian Schools and Youth Workers: How to Prepare for and Handle Tragedy** by *Sandy J. Austin*. Sandy Austin is a high school counselor who helped in the wake of the Columbine shootings. This book offers tips to help churches or Christian schools plan for and respond to tragedies. (Beacon Hill, 2007; ISBN 978-0834123106)

**Crisis Counseling: A Guide for Pastors and Professionals** by *Scott Floyd*. This book offers a biblically-based guide for working through crisis situations, and it includes insights on the creation of a crisis response team within the church. (Kregel Academic & Professional, 2008; ISBN 978-0825425882) for Consumers.

**Risk Management Handbook for Churches and Schools** by James Cobble, Jr. and Richard R. Hammar. This book provides extensive information to help churches and schools prevent injuries and accidents, protect property, and reduce potential litigation. Whether it involves ministry to children or youth, recreational programs or church construction projects, safeguarding your facilities or church transportation issues, reducing liability risks or purchasing insurance, this book covers it all.

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