

WYOMING ANNUAL CONFERENCE



CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN

Wyoming 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.

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.

Some types of potential crises involving the church or conference:

Personal: Examples: accusations against a pastor or official; violent death or injury of a pastor or official.

Institutional: Examples: camper attacked at church camp; explosion at a church facility; lawsuit against conference; threatening letters to conference that become public.

Natural disasters affecting churches or communities

The Crisis Management Team (CMT) will include:

Bishop Susan W. Hassinger

Conference Director of Connectional Ministries: **Rev. Mark Marino**

Conference Director of Communications: **Don Perry**

Dean of Cabinet: **Rev. Bette Poe**

District Superintendent(s) related to the affected church(es)

Others who may be involved depending upon the situation:

Conference Chancellor: **David Gouldin**

Other conference staff or leaders as appropriate, such as Director of Sky Lake, Youth Coordinator, etc.

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, the Director of Connectional Ministries, and/or the Dean of the Cabinet.

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, and Conference Director of Connectional Ministries office.

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

Responsibilities of Team Members

The Bishop or designated spokesperson will:

- ' Review public reports on the crisis
- ' Be available for interviews or press conferences
- ' Work with the CMT to anticipate questions and review facts

The Director of Communications will:

- ' Assist in activating the Crisis Management Team
- ' Gather information about the incident/event
- ' Prepare public statements for approval by the bishop
- ' Prepare background information handouts for the media
- ' Report media activity to other members of the CMT
- ' Advise support staff on how to handle calls relating to the crisis
- ' Be available to support the pastor if the crisis involves a local church.
- ' Maintain a file of media contacts, news clippings and other information about the incident/event

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 s/he cannot be contacted or is out of the area

The Conference Center & 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. 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, 4p.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;
- ' 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 the authorized media spokesperson. Depending on the situation, the Bishop may designate another person- usually the Director of Communications- to speak in her/his place. The spokesperson must be thoroughly briefed, prepared and- if at all possible- clear releases with the Bishop 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 should be accessible 24-hours each day during the first day or two of the crisis, or longer as needed.

If a team member suspects there might be legal implications, especially before or after a media contact, s/he should contact the Chancellor at any time.

The First 90 Minutes

- ' 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.
- ' 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.
- ' 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?
- ' 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.
- ' 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."

Get busy to uncover as many facts as you can, develop a factual statement and be back in touch with the media.

When the media calls:

- ' Refer media inquiries to the designated spokesperson.
- ' Any team member speaking for the Annual Conference should:
 - ' Prepare mentally for the interview. What will you say? Remember your rights (above).
 - ' 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 Director and support staff 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 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 voicemail without taking a message.
- ' Get reporter's name, media outlet, direct phone number, and deadline.
- ' Ask for topic of story.
- ' Explain that the Director of Communications will return the call.
- ' Do not answer any questions. Be polite, but firm.
- ' Complete a Media Inquiry Sheet for each call. (see page 8)
- ' 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 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." (See page 5)
- ' Don't use the term "no comment." (See page 5)

Handling Casual Conversations or Questions About a Crisis

- ' Don't speculate, repeat unconfirmed information or express personal opinions.
- ' Do respond with a brief, positive, general statement.
- ' 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

{ Complete and fax or e-mail to the Director of Communications as soon as possible }
{ Conference Center Fax: 607-757-0752 ; Dir. of Communications: dperry@wyomingconfernce.org }
{ Use a new sheet to log every call or contact; see page 6 }

Day & Date: _____

Time: _____

Name of caller: _____

From: _____
<name and type of outlet; e.g. newspaper, TV station, wire service, etc.)

Phone Number: _____

E-Mail: _____

Is follow up required? ___Yes ___No

If yes, be specific:

Summary of conversation:

Signature