DIOCESE of WINCHESTER

Crisis Communications Plan

A crisis is defined as any event that can cause harm to an individual or group's reputation. If an incident occurs that could generate negative media interest, a crisis communications plan will ensure that the right people in an organisation are informed, a positioning statement and key messages are agreed, and media protocols are followed.

In the wake of a crisis or tragedy that happens in a community, the role of churches and Church of England schools are important. The community will often look to them as a trusted and long-standing institutions, embedded in the life of the community, that can offer guidance and pastoral support, so it is important to be prepared to take on this role.

Agreeing on a Crisis Response Team

Before a crisis occurs, it is good practice to agree on a Crisis Response process for your church, which should involve an individual or team who is responsible for the following:

- Keeping and maintaining a list of names and details, including out-of-hours phone numbers, of who to contact in a crisis
- Liaising with the Communications Team at the diocese
- Managing all media and social media statements, press releases, interviews and media visits as appropriate
- Monitoring press/media coverage and taking action as required
- Managing internal communications
- Advising on actions necessary to protect the church's reputation

You may also need to agree on spokespeople to speak to the media in the event of a crisis. It is also important to contact the Archdeacons and Communications Team at the diocese, who will be able to support you in dealing with the media.

Churches may also wish to consider doing some additional training in Crisis Communications, such as a course offered by Jersey Road, a PR firm which specialise in churches and Christian organisations.

Basic Crisis Communications Checklist

1. **Anticipate and Plan** - be prepared for possible crises and think about key messages ahead of time. Consider plausible crisis scenarios, detailing the level of risk, the worst case outcome, and the actions you could take to prevent this type of situation from happening and how you respond if it occurs
2. **Get Support** - in the event of a crisis, contact people who can support you, such as the Archdeacons and Communications Team at the diocese
3. **Keep a Record** - as the situation unfolds, keep a record and timeline of key dates and events
4. **Stay Consistent** - coordinate with all parties (those involved, wardens, PCC, diocese) to establish a consistent approach with agreed key messages
5. **Provide a Statement** - after consulting with relevant parties and the diocese, respond with a statement as quickly as you can
6. **Respond Calmly to the Press** - don't be pressurised by a journalist asking you to give an immediate response or to 'confirm their source' - the media may have less information than they are claiming. Always ask for their deadline and say you will call back
7. **Appoint Just One Spokesperson** - this is one person who liaises with the media, and it could be from the diocesan Communications Team if appropriate
8. **Transparency is Key** - your statement should be entirely factual, reflecting Christian values of love and compassion, and should include an apology if needed
9. **Keep it Simple** – use simple, concise key messages which you keep coming back to and ensure others do not deviate from them
10. **Control the Narrative** - turn a crisis into an opportunity to tell a better story about your church or school, which includes asking to see any questions in advance of a media interview

In More Detail - Responding to a Crisis

What to Do When You Learn of a Potential Crisis

If you learn of a crisis for the first time via the media (usually a call from a journalist)…

1. Politely but firmly decline to answer the reporter's questions, stating that you need to find the best person for them to speak to. Record the following:

- The time and date of the call
- The reporter's name
- The reporter's telephone number
- The reporter's email address
- The media outlet the reporter works for
- Information the reporter is seeking
- The topic of the story
- The reporter's deadline

2. Contact your Crisis Communications representative and provide the information outlined above. This person should then get in touch with the diocesan communications team for support.

3. The Crisis Communications representative must then gather facts from key people who know information about the situation and draft a media statement that addresses the reporter's questions.

4. Once the media statement has been finalised, this will be forwarded to the reporter and you will need to determine what/if information needs to be released to others in the congregation.

5. Monitor media coverage of the story on social media, news websites, local radio and share any press coverage with key people and the diocesan communications team.

If you become aware of a potential crisis in your community which has not yet been picked up by the media, follow the same process from step 2 – seeking advice from the diocesan communications team about whether to proactively send a statement to the press. It is usually advisable to wait and have a reactive ('if asked') statement ready for if/when you are contacted by the press.

Responding to a National Tragedy

On matters of national importance, such as the death of the monarch, it is helpful for churches to be a focal point and provide a pastoral response. On such occasions, people may want to visit your church to pray or to light a candle. In such events:

1. Check with the diocese to see if there are any protocols or guidance supplied by the national church (e.g. flag flying instructions, special liturgy).

2. Open your church (possibly organising vigils etc.) and let people know that your church is open on social media.

3. Post a message of condolence or a prayer, and keep it up-to-date in regards to activities your church is undertaking in relation to the event.

4. Liaise with other community leaders, inviting them to lay flowers or to civic services.

Responding to a Local Community Tragedy

In responding to a local community tragedy, if your church or school is in the immediate vicinity to where the situation is occurring, your church could find itself in the middle of a large amount of media attention. You'll need as much support as possible, and may find the steps below useful:

1. Contact the Diocesan Communications Team to update them about what's happening, seek advice or guidance, or ask if they could come down to your church. It is also advisable to contact the Archdeacon and your Area Dean.

2. Open your church and make it available for people to pray, advertising this on social media, and liaise with other community leaders and local media to inform them what is being organised.

3. Call members of your church and let them know what is happening so you have additional help on the ground. Designate roles to these people and ensure everyone's wearing name tags so they're easily identifiable.

Using Social Media in a Crisis

Social media is extremely valuable in a crisis. You can use platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or Instagram to communicate vital information, request certain items and the need for volunteers.

1. Before a crisis happens, identify key people within your church who will respond on social media and ensure they have the appropriate login details.

2. If your church is in the immediate vicinity to a community tragedy, ascertain if there is a hashtag being used, and use them in your posts. You should also identify the Twitter/Facebook handles of key services/ agencies/local media and tag them in your posts.

3. Publicly acknowledge what is going on. You can reshare a news report and add a comment or create an organic post. In both circumstances, stick to the facts.

Complete Crisis Checklist

Actions Prior to a Crisis

- Create various templates for media statements ready for possible crisis communications situations
- Appoint a Crisis Communications Representative or Team to make key decisions in the event of a crisis, and obtain their out of hours contact details
- Agree on media spokespeople and record their out of hours contact details. Provide training for these people if needed
- Ensure the Crisis Communications Team meets regularly to discuss potential risks and how they can be managed and monitored, sharing copies of your crisis communications plan and other relevant protocols and policies
- Develop a social media policy, outlining how you will respond to crisis situations using your key social channels
- Create a checklist of every stakeholder group who must receive agreed communications messages in a crisis. Establish text, email and social media distribution lists and distribution systems for these groups, with details of who is responsible for contacting these stakeholders
- Make sure everyone is briefed to let the diocesan Communications Team know immediately of any potential crisis situation

Immediate Actions Once a Crisis Has Taken Place

- The first person to discover an incident will alert the Crisis Communications Representative in your church or school and diocesan Communications teams and any other people who have key roles to play
- The representative should convene a Crisis Response Team which should meet within a certain timeframe of the story breaking or coming to attention, to determine current known facts, position and key messages
- Potentially prepare and issue a holding statement to the media and agree on social media responses/approach
- Communicate appropriate information about the situation with key external and internal stakeholders in the community
- Put together a full media response statement as quickly as possible, usually within 24 hours
- Liaise with third parties such as the police, emergency services, or hospital, and report back to key stakeholders
- Provide a flow of information for the media through further statements and interviewees
- Begin a detailed recording of actions in response to the crisis and monitor the media output, responding promptly to misinformation if appropriate and only once seeking advice
- Explain to the media the limitations of any information that can be provided

Actions After the Event

- Obtain feedback from other parties for a subsequent review of the handling of the crisis
- Hold an evaluation meeting to review the event and lessons learnt, and evaluate the crisis communications plan as well as relevant policies such as the your social media policy
- Plan ahead regarding future dates related to the incident (e.g. inquests, inquiries, anniversaries)
- Thank all who have assisted/cooperated, either publicly or privately as appropriate, including the media where appropriate