

How Can Your Church Make an Impact with a Crisis Communication Strategy?



How your church maneuvers through moments of crisis either illuminates the hope you profess or causes stumbling blocks to an already wounded world.

Unfortunately, your church cannot schedule when a difficult situation will happen or who will be available to help. Instead, you can prepare a crisis communication plan to assist your church in effectively ministering during your church's and/or community's greatest hours of need.

REMEMBER YOUR PURPOSE

A crisis may take on various forms including some of the following scenarios: natural disasters, criminal activity, personnel issues, violence, death, and perceived crises.



While every crisis has the power to alter opinion, it is most important to remember your purpose to “care for the flock entrusted to you” (1 Peter 5:2) and to be proactive by developing a communication strategy before a crisis hits.

Below is a list of items your church should consider while developing crisis communication procedures:

- ✓ Establish a Crisis Communications Team
- ✓ Assign descriptive crisis roles for each team member
- ✓ Confirm all crisis team members have access to and receive weather notifications
- ✓ Determine who has the authority to send emergency notifications
- ✓ Determine your church’s policy regarding local media requests
- ✓ Create groups of first responders and decision makers
- ✓ Develop emergency notification scenarios for when you will send notifications (including inclement weather and man-made crises)
- ✓ Create emergency message templates for each scenario including the recipient lists
- ✓ Identify which communication methods will be used in each scenario and test them often
- ✓ Regularly verify contact information accuracy
- ✓ Market and educate your employees, volunteers, and members on your crisis communication strategy including what to expect and what to do during a crisis
- ✓ Provide frequent crisis communication trainings and safety drills for employees and volunteers
- ✓ Develop a positive working relationship with local media outlets
- ✓ Seek wisdom from legal counsel and insurance providers

“A [crisis] situation puts your organization’s values on trial in the court of public opinion”
-William N. Curry, PRSA

REMEMBER TO FEED THE SHEEP

From the initial event of a crisis to its resolution, take advantage of multiple methods of communication. It is in these moments that your hard work and preparation will enable your team to minister to your church and/or community.

Spreading your message via: voice calls, text messages, emails, social media, app, website, and/or local media outlets will strengthen your impact during a crisis.

Voice Calls

A familiar voice can be a soothing balm in a crisis.



Phone calls enable you to confidently lead in a crisis giving you the power to define how your message is presented through the tone of your voice.

However, depending on the gravity of the crisis and the size of your church...personally calling everyone can be unrealistic.

Utilizing your mass notification system's voice messaging feature enables you the ability to communicate in your own voice to multitudes in a short amount of time.

Some benefits of phone calls/voice messages are they can be received on landline and mobile phones; and most of your contacts will have a phone number. Additionally, mass notification systems can provide reports from the recipient carriers confirming if the message was delivered and how long the recipient listened.

The negative for utilizing phone calls during a crisis is that during natural disasters cell towers and/or landline phone lines can be damaged preventing the call to get through.

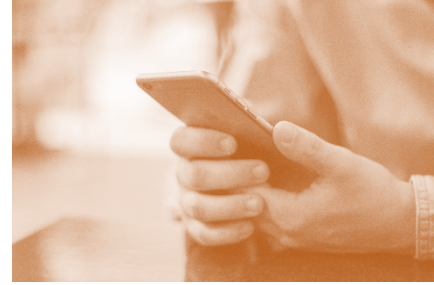
Tips for crisis voice calls:

- ✓ Keep your message short and direct
- ✓ Create template messages prior to emergencies and have them easily accessible
- ✓ Identify yourself and organization
- ✓ Describe the crisis in one sentence
- ✓ Tell them what to do
- ✓ Provide crisis contact information

Text Messages

Quick updates can ensure everyone stays knowledgeable in a crisis.

Texting enables you to provide short messages with links to more information.



While a church leader may have several contacts in their personal phone, they probably will not have time to field multiple texts in the middle of a crisis.

Mass text messaging services allow the sender the ability to swiftly distribute and request information during a crisis to multiple recipients while storing the information for various administrators to manage.

Some benefits to text messages are that 95% of Americans own a cellphone and 77% own a smartphone per Pew Research Group. Thus, depending on your demographic, your chances of reaching most recipients during a crisis via text message are high. Plus, text messaging services can provide reports from the recipient carriers confirming the success of each text message.



The negative for utilizing text messaging during a crisis is that some demographics do not have access to cellphones with text message packages.

Also, texting is limited to 140 characters per message. Meaning, any text over 140 characters will create multiple messages that can be jumbled by the recipient's carrier stimulating additional frustration and confusion.

Tips for crisis text messaging:

- ✓ Keep the message short and direct (remember 1 text is 140 characters)
- ✓ Receive permission from recipients to send text messages
- ✓ Define and communicate emergency terms to recipients prior to events (ex. Shelter in place)
- ✓ Create text message template messages for each potential scenario complete with recipients
- ✓ Provide links for additional information within your message
- ✓ Perform emergency text message tests

"The secret of crisis management is not good vs. bad, it's preventing the bad from getting worse." – Andy Gilman



Email

Email allows you the flexibility to provide quick updates or lengthy details including images, attachments, and links for additional information to a large sum of people at once.

Although email can be sent from one sender to a large amount of people, most church leaders do not have every member's contact information in their email contacts.

Your mass notification system can alleviate the burden by: housing or integrating contacts from your church database, providing analytics regarding the email successes (including: sent, bounced, received, opened, and clicked thru) and allowing multiple administrators permissions to manage email messages.

The negative for utilizing email messaging during a crisis is that email relies on an Internet connection and the recipient's access to their email account.

Tips for crisis email messaging:

- ✓ Create email templates before a crisis for multiple scenarios
- ✓ Keep the initial crisis email brief including action items
- ✓ Offer information on what to expect regarding future communication
- ✓ Provide links for additional crisis information

Social Media

Effectively steering the conversations regarding your crisis is critical.

Social media provides a unique outlet for church leaders to provide information for both church members and the community.

Some platforms provide private groups (such as Facebook) where you can limit the conversation to a select group of people. Most platforms describe your contacts as "followers". These followers can range from members of the church to curious members of the community and local media outlets.

Some undesirable results of utilizing social media are that you must counter adverse



feedback in front of a potentially large audience during a high stress situation and messaging relies on an Internet connection.

Tips for crisis social media messaging:

- ✓ Appoint a social media point person
- ✓ Determine what scenarios will be posted to social media prior to crises
- ✓ Educate your followers on the crisis event
- ✓ Clearly define the action you need them to take
- ✓ Communicate your ability to respond to requests
- ✓ Exhibit compassion for victims
- ✓ Provide resources for victims and/or volunteers
- ✓ Motivate prayer and/or service

Very simply, your organization's crisis plan is *incomplete* without a comprehensive digital strategy." – Jane Jordan-Meier

Church App

Push notifications from your church app are great assets during a crisis.

In the event of an emergency, contacts who have downloaded your church app can receive instant updates once the app administrator posts information to the app.

Much like a website, your church app can house critical information for church and community members to stay current with the latest information.



While the app is a great resource, it should not be the main source of communication given that some members may not have access to mobile devices and Internet services can be disrupted during natural disasters.

Tips for utilizing your church app in a crisis:

- ✓ Clearly define how the app will be utilized for communication during the crisis
- ✓ Provide resources for victims and/or volunteers

Website

Your church website can serve as the main hub of information during a crisis.

Depending on your ability to edit your site and the size of the crisis, you could create a webpage dedicated to the event including a summary of the crisis, ongoing updates for victims and families, service opportunities, forms, etc.

Consequently, during a natural disaster there can be a disruption in Internet service for either the church and/or the community thus limiting the ability to communicate via the website.

Tips for utilizing your church website in a crisis:

- Create a template crisis page including a response form
- Clearly define how the website will be utilized for communication
- Provide resources for victims and/or volunteers

Local Media

The church can use this local media to both inform members of crisis information and/or encourage community members to seek refuge during a crisis.

Some local television stations provide a news ticker service to display text-based information during their coverage of a community wide crisis.

Tips for utilizing local media in a crisis:

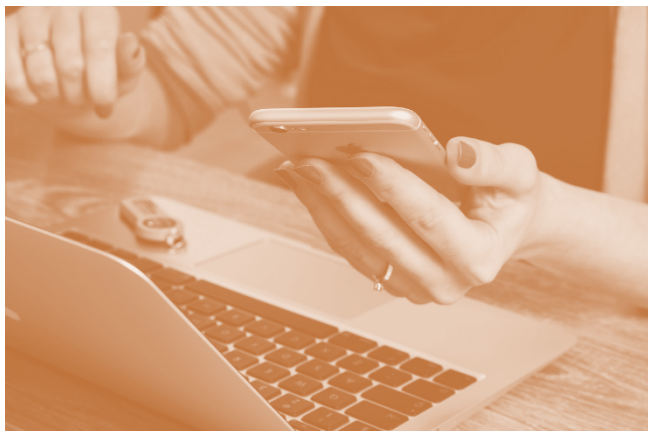
- ✓ Create a media communication template
- ✓ Identify yourself and your church
- ✓ Provide contact information
- ✓ Provide basic information

EXTEND GRACE AND LEARN FROM FAILURES

Once the crisis has resolved, gather your Crisis Communications Team to review the deployed communication methods. Consider providing evaluation surveys for members of your team along with others impacted by the event. Finally, extend forgiveness for errors in the process and make notes to strengthen your crisis procedures for the future.

Questions to consider in your post crisis evaluation process:

- ✓ Did the crisis communications team assemble quickly?
- ✓ Was your crisis communication plan easily accessible?
- ✓ Were the crisis team members able to provide guidance and manage their assigned roles?
- ✓ Were the communication methods reliable?
- ✓ Did you have accurate contact information?
- ✓ Did employees know what to do?
- ✓ Did church members, volunteers, and others involved know what to do?
- ✓ Were facts gathered quickly and in a timely manner?
- ✓ Was accurate information clearly communicated?
- ✓ Were critical steps missing from the crisis plan?
- ✓ Was the crisis communications team effective?
- ✓ How could you be better prepared in the future?



In conclusion, when it comes to your church's crisis communication strategy it is best to heed these wise words: "if you fail to plan, you are planning to fail" (Benjamin Franklin) and "those who fail to learn from the past are doomed to repeat it" (Sir Winston Churchill).

Remember every moment is an opportunity to share the hope you profess and be a light in our dark world.

"Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).



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