

CRISIS COMMUNICATION

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You are sitting in your office when parents deliver devastating news: they accuse your 22 year old youth minister of having sex with their 16 year old daughter. This article addresses some of the communication issues that arise when facing a crisis, such as one described in the prior sentence. All these steps should be made in connection with advice from a competent attorney.

Your first step is to determine who needs to receive communication from the church and the type of information you will need to communicate to the various groups. You need to avoid getting sued because you revealed private facts about someone or because you have defamed someone's reputation. You want to avoid talking about charges that may later prove to be false. At this stage, you only know that an accusation has been made. I am addressing only communication concerns before the church completes its investigation of the allegations.

1. Communicate with law enforcement. In this example, you must report the allegation to the appropriate law enforcement authorities because it involves potential abuse of a child. You will tell them the names and contact information about the victim, the persons who reported the abuse and alleged perpetrator. You will only repeat the exact allegation you received.
2. Preserve evidence. Once you receive the allegation you must take steps to preserve evidence, especially electronic evidence. This means you physically seize the alleged perpetrator's computer and preserve all backups of email, voice mail and cell phone (if church owned). If the victim is also an employee or volunteer, you would take the same steps with their electronic records.
3. Communicate with the alleged perpetrator. You will visit with the youth minister and report the exact allegation you received. Next you should ask for any statement the perpetrator wants to make. Ask for names and contact information for witnesses that he suggests as having relevant information.
4. Communicate with the authorities within your church. You will then notify the authority within your church empowered to take action. Normally, this will be the senior pastor and church board. Again, you communicate only what you have been told. Everyone should be cautioned that this is a confidential matter and should not be discussed outside a formal, called meeting. The board needs to initiate any investigation.
5. Communicate with staff. After receiving direction from the governing body of the church, the staff needs to know the situation. The communication should be brief and factual. They should be given a brief statement to read if they are approached by members and instructed to refer all questions to the designated church representative. They should also be instructed that they are not to discuss the matter with any media other than reading the brief statement.

6. Communicate with members. You will then draft a statement that will be given or read to members at a church meeting. The statement will be very brief and general. In the example, it would state that an allegation about wrongful conduct has been made against the youth minister. You would then assure the members that the church board is investigating the allegation.

7. Communicate with the victim and her family. At this time you need to separate the role of pastoral care from the role of church representatives if the church is later sued. The victim needs pastoral care from someone who is not and will not be involved in the church's investigation and/or disciplinary action, if any. I typically suggest building a "Chinese wall" around the minister providing pastoral care so that he or she is unaware of the church's investigation and actions. In smaller churches, I suggest that you provide the pastor from a sister church to provide pastoral care because he or she will be able to freely minister God's love to the victim without concern about any legal issues.

8. Communicate with the alleged perpetrator and his family. Serious allegations have a major impact on the perpetrator and his family, regardless of the truthfulness of the allegation. Similar to the victim, these individuals need pastoral care from someone who will be able to administer God's love without concern over any legal issues. Again, the minister providing pastoral care will need to be separated by a "Chinese wall" from all involved in the investigation and/or disciplinary action. Smaller churches need to provide pastoral care from a minister not associated with that church, usually a pastor a sister church. This minister cannot be the same one that is ministering to the victim.

9. Communicate with the media. Assign a single person to interface with all media. This person should be very familiar with public relations and legal issues that may arise. The phrase "no comment" is generally not appropriate, but telling everything may be worse. Keep the comments focused on prayer for the families involved.

By keeping these rules in mind, the church may avoid miscommunication problems.