

MANAGING A CRISIS

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“A house is built by wisdom and becomes strong through good sense.” Proverbs 24:3 (The New Living Translation).

Most churches conduct their affairs without a crisis in any given year. However, for the few that experience a crisis, the experience can be devastating. This article urges all churches to develop a crisis management plan to minimize the legal, financial, spiritual and emotional damage to the church. It also describes the basic components in a good crisis management plan.

WHAT IS A CRISIS?

I define “crisis” to include any event that may cause major trauma to the local body of believers. Some examples of a crisis include:

- sexual misconduct by someone associated with the church
- theft of material amounts by clergy or staff
- accident that results in the serious injury or death of members during a church outing
- fire that destroys majority of church property
- fraud conducted by clergy

Each of these events has the potential to seriously damage or destroy a local church. In my nearly 30 years of dealing with church matters, I noticed some churches handled these events much better than others. My suggested plan is derived from these experiences.

WHAT IS A CRISIS PLAN?

A crisis plan is a document that describes the duties and responsibilities of specific individuals if a crisis occurs. While the details of the document will vary from church to church, the concept requires the church to respond in a planned, orderly fashion.

The plan should appoint a crisis management committee. This committee should include:

- the church’s key contact person
- the church’s attorney
- the public relations person
- the church's spokesperson
- a person to direct pastoral care
- a psychologist or counselor

- the church's webmaster
- the church's senior pastor

The key contact person is an individual at the church selects to be contacted by the person who first becomes aware of the crisis. When a church leader conducts a church activity, he or she should be given contact information for this person including work telephone number, home telephone number, cell number and e-mail address. This should be a person who is generally available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Since this person's role is primarily to facilitate the flow of information, this person should not be the church's senior pastor. This person's job is to contact the crisis management committee and initiate the first telephone conference of the committee. This person will keep the same contact information on all members of the committee with them at all times.

The church's attorney should be aware of church law, insurance coverage and personal injury law. The attorney's responsibility is to notify the insurance carrier of the potential claim. He or she should also advise the committee regarding risks and rewards of potential strategies. Properly executed, this attorney should help the church minimize its liability.

The church should locate a public relations professional to assist it in dealing with the media. This person should assist in drafting all written statements given to the media and members. This person will prepare the church's spokesperson to deal with the media.

The church should appoint a spokesperson to deal with the media. Generally, a spokesperson should not be a member of the pastoral team. Pastors are not prepared to deal with aggressive media. I suggest the church appoint a business person, typically the chairman of its church council or personnel committee. It should be someone who is not easily influenced by the media and who will be perceived as truthful. This person's responsibility is to respond to all requests for information from the media. The church should circulate a memo to all staff requiring them to direct all media inquiries to the spokesperson.

The church should appoint someone to direct pastoral care to the victims and their families. This person should not be involved in the decision-making by the church. Typically, this person should not be the senior pastor because the senior pastor will be involved in all major decisions. This person's primary responsibility is to reach out to those who are hurting as a result of the crisis and provide them with hope and healing. Due to the nature of some of the crises, this person may need to be affiliated with a sister congregation. The goal of this position is to maintain confidentiality of the victims' information without impairing the church's decision-making ability.

The church should appoint a Christian counselor or psychologist to be available to the victims and/or their families. This person's role is to supplement pastoral care being provided by the church.

The church's webmaster may become the primary facilitator of communication between the church, its members and victims. In the case of a bus crash, the church can create a secure portion of its web site for communicating the status of victims to their family members. The church provides the address and password to the family members. The use of the Web greatly reduces the number of phone calls to the church. The webmaster may also assist in sending mass e-mails to members and victims when appropriate.

The senior pastor marshals the resources of the church to meet the crisis. For example, he may assign staff members to specific tasks to support the committee's work. He is also primarily responsible for communicating the committee's work to the church's governing body if the spokesperson is not a member of that body.

In addition to the appointment of these individuals, the plan provides specific directives to each person. It also governs the crisis management committee's actions.

RESULTS OF APPLYING WISDOM

One hopes that the church never experiences a crisis. According to some sources, only about 4% of the churches in America will experience a crisis in one year. For those 4%, advance planning will make a huge difference. By planning for a crisis, the church may respond in an orderly fashion and minimize its exposure to the devastation caused by crisis.