

Media Things to Think About in a Church Crisis

Brian Kiely, Unitarian Church of Edmonton, March, 2012

This is a very first draft written to be a support document for a blog post on [Divining the Digital Reformation](#). At this stage it is one amateur's attempt to start thinking through policies on a local congregation level. It needs a lot of work. Hopefully a revised form of this document (or a better one) will appear as the leadership of the Unitarian Church of Edmonton has a chance to think through the issue later this year. Comments and suggestions welcome. Write me at briki@aol.com.

Pretty much by definition, a crisis that draws media attention will catch you unawares. It is not unusual to first learn of the issue from the media when they come calling. It would be wise for the congregation to have a few basic things in place:

1. **When the media calls, who answers?** Designate one or two people to be the designated spokesperson for the congregation. When the media calls, direct the inquiry to them. The worst thing that can happen in the early stages is for an unprepared person to speak off the top of their heads. They might get it exactly right, but if they don't, it can be hard to come back. The nature of the crisis may mean that others will have to speak as well, but that can be decided as the issue unfolds.
2. **What does the spokesperson say when the first call comes in?** There are excellent guidelines for crisis management in the James Lukasewski article below, but the first major point is to listen to the media person. Ask what they know of the issue, especially if this is your first hearing. They will often have more information than you (accurate or not). Their information will also give clues to how the story unfolds. Then, promise to get back to them as soon as you have had time to look into it... and keep that promise.
3. **Assemble as many members of your crisis management team as you can quickly.** Strategize with them. Many heads are better than one. You will have to make a judgment call on how much time can elapse before you must respond, but delay is seldom good. A time sensitive crisis will need a response in the same day, ideally within an hour or two. Who is involved in the decision? Ideally a pre-selected team. If none exists, then it has to be key church leaders: the President, the Minister and Staff, possibly someone involved directly in the crisis and maybe a 'wise elder'. There is likely no time for a full Board meeting before the initial media response.

4. When the response goes out, in the form of interview or media release, **be as open as possible and as honest as possible and as compassionately human as possible**. Look to the Unitarian Universalist principles to help formulate responses. Case studies abound showing that organizations that try to deflect blame or refuse responsibility suffer far more in the end.
5. **Attend to your social media!** Whatever comments are made to media need to go on your website, your Facebook page, your church Twitter account etc. Someone (or a couple of people) from the team should be designated to follow the social media so that misinformation can be rebutted in a timely fashion. Studies are showing that people choose one or two forms of media to get their information. Because you have talked to a news reporter does not mean that folks who track media online will see that response. You must be proactive in getting your message out.
6. **Reach out to your congregation members.** Ideally they will learn of the issue from you and not the media. They are your first and most important constituency. Use e-mail blasts or phone trees or in house social media networks, but do your very best to reach out and reassure them.

The piece below summarizes some of the best strategies for shaping media responses. The article cited in the endnote includes a case study that more fully demonstrates these principles at work, and when the consequences when they are ignored.

1. Candor:

- Outward recognition through promptly verbalized public acknowledgement that a problem exists; that people or groups of people, the environment, or the public trust is affected; and that something will be done to remediate the situation.ⁱ

2. Explanation (no matter how silly, stupid, or embarrassing the problem causing error was):

- Promptly and briefly explain why the problem occurred and the known underlying reasons or behaviors that led to the situation (even if there is only partial early information).
- Talk about what was learned from the situation and how it will influence the organization's future behavior.

- Unconditionally commit to regularly report additional information until it is all out, or until no public interest remains.

3. Declaration:

- A public commitment and discussion of specific, positive steps to be taken conclusively address the issues and resolve the situation

4. Contrition:

- The continuing verbalization of regret, empathy, sympathy, even embarrassment. Take appropriate responsibility for having allowed the situation to occur in the first place, whether by omission, commission, accident, or negligence.

5. Consultation:

- Promptly ask for help and counsel from victims, government, and the community of origin - even from opponents.
- Directly involve and request the participation of those most directly affected to help develop more permanent solutions, more acceptable behaviors, and to design principles and approaches that will preclude similar problems from occurring.

6. Commitment:

- Publicly set organizational goals at zero.

Zero errors.

Zero defects.

Zero dumb decisions.

Zero problems.

- Publicly promise that to the best of the organization's ability similar situations will never occur or reoccur.

7. Restitution:

- Find a way to quickly pay the price.
- Make or require restitution.
- Go beyond community and victim expectations and what would be required under normal circumstances to remediate the problem.
- Adverse situations remediated quickly cost far less and are controversial for much shorter periods of time

**ⁱ SEVEN DIMENSIONS OF CRISIS COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT:
A STRATEGIC ANALYSIS AND PLANNING MODEL[©]**

(<http://www.e911.com/monos/A001.html>)

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