

THE INSURANCE ADVISOR

For America's Churches and Related Ministries from Brotherhood Mutual and Its Agents

DEALING WITH THE MEDIA DURING A CRISIS AT YOUR CHURCH

ISSUE 15—HOW DO YOU TALK TO THE MEDIA WHEN A CRISIS HITS?

Having a media strategy in place helps you handle a crisis more effectively. With it you can communicate the information you want in the way you want.

You hope it never happens. But imagine that a parent accuses your nursery worker of child molestation or a parishioner sues for personal injury arising out of a disciplinary measure.

Handling these events will be difficult enough. Add the dimension of dealing with the media and your task becomes more challenging.

If such an event occurs at your church, the media will likely cover it, particularly if your church is located in a bigger media market. And whether or

not you like the idea of contending with reporters, cameras, and microphones, you may need to.

How will you communicate the information you want—in the way you want? Do you know what to say and what not to say? How will you send one consistent message to the public? Having a “media strategy” in mind before a crisis will help you.

CONTACT YOUR INSURER

The first step in any crisis is to report the incident to your insurance agent immediately, no matter the severity of the claim. If the claim has the potential to catch the media's attention, it's important that you have early contact with your insurance company.

While contacting your agent and /or insurance company is the ideal first step, it's not always possible. A story leaks, the media scoops it. An accident occurs, a photographer arrives on the scene with a camera. Sometimes the media will be at your door or on your phone before you are able to talk with your insurance company.

In this scenario, you'll need to develop a carefully controlled message sent through one spokesperson.



Anticipate questions reporters will ask. Determine ahead of time what you will say and what you won't or can't say. Seek your attorney's advice and have him or her present at news conferences, if possible.

CONTROL YOUR MESSAGE

Here are some general guidelines for dealing with the media:

- Avoid extremes. Some pastors seek coverage, hoping to appear on every newscast, while others padlock their churches' front doors, never to be found. Neither approach is effective.
- Develop a response other than "no comment." If a criminal act has allegedly occurred, as in the case of child abuse, issue a brief statement like this: "The safety and well-being of our youth are extremely important to our ministry. We are cooperating with the authorities in their investigation, and any comments made before the investigation is complete would be premature."
- Prepare a written statement for distribution with the help of your attorney and/or insurance company. Such a statement often will be more appropriate than extemporaneous or sometimes conflicting comments from church representatives.

- Select a central spokesperson through whom all messages are communicated. Encourage your congregation to refer media inquiries to him or her. The spokesperson should be articulate, diplomatic, and sincere. Your spokesperson, in essence, becomes the "persona" or "voice" of your church on the television, in the newspaper, and over the airwaves. If that person appears caring and concerned, your church will be perceived as such.
- Anticipate questions reporters will ask. Determine ahead of time what you will say and what you won't or can't say. Seek your attorney's advice and have him or her present at news conferences, if possible.
- Speak in sound bites—short sentences and concise thoughts. Don't ramble. Emphasize key points made in the news release, and don't deviate from them.
- Maintain an open mind and a good attitude about dealing with the media. Most of the time these professionals want to work with you, not against you. Your predisposition or attitude toward the media could influence the treatment you receive.



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