



Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference Media Crisis Response Plan

A Media Crisis in the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference is:

An event or emergency associated in some way with the Church but beyond its control can be expected to become public. It presents the potential for damage to individuals or the image of the Church and hinders the ability to be in ministry. In other words, a media crisis is anything that could cause the public to lose faith in their local church, the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference leadership or The United Methodist Church.

Media Crises Come in Several Packages

- Personnel crisis (clergy, church staff, or lay member's misconduct, death, illness, or injury)
- Threatened criminal or legal action
- Violent acts, demonstrations
- Corporate crisis (lawsuits against the conference, an agency or an institution)
- Natural disasters that affect our churches and communities
- Positive crisis (donations exceed what can be handled, etc.)

Purpose of Crisis Response Plan

- Provide compassion for victims
- Meet the needs of the media
- Project a positive image of the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference and The United Methodist Church

Immediate Crisis Response Team

The Immediate Crisis Response Team will consist of five persons:

- Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference bishop
- Assistant to the bishop
- District superintendent of the affected area
- Connectional Ministries officer
- Conference director of communications

Media Crisis Management Team

The Media Crisis Management Team will include:

- The Immediate Crisis Response Team
- The Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference connectional table or cabinet
- The Tennessee Conference chancellor
- The Tennessee Conference treasurer
- Other leaders, as deemed appropriate by the bishop

Actions - Media Crisis Management Team

1. The bishop will decide whether to notify the Media Crisis Management Team.
2. If asked to release information about the crisis, the Media Crisis team will:
 - a. develop a strategy for the dissemination of information
 - b. determine how much and what kind of information can be released
 - c. decide when and to whom the information will be released
 - d. develop an official statement regarding the situation (brief, confirmed facts, the Church's response, and an expression of compassion for all concerned).

3. The bishop or alternate spokesperson and local church pastor* or agency director* must be thoroughly and regularly briefed before making any appearances or statements. The spokespersons may refer news media to others who can speak with authority on a particular subject.
*If the local church pastor or agency director is intimately involved in the crisis, she/he will not be a spokesperson.
4. The Media Crisis team will determine whether the spokesperson should leave immediately for the location of the crisis (such as a church camp or church building). This may be necessary if reporters are already on site and no spokesperson is present.
5. The bishop or alternate spokesperson must establish a schedule for regular briefing sessions of team members for updates and discussion during the first few days of the crisis when media interest will be most intense.
6. The team is authorized to engage other professionals as needed. The bishop or his/her designated representative and the team will determine who receives information, updates, and copies of all statements and releases.
7. The team agrees to provide 24-hour availability and access to one another.

Responsibilities of Team Members

The Bishop and/or Bishop's Assistant and Alternate Spokespersons will:

- review public reports on the crisis
- clear calendar when a media conference is necessary
- be available for key media interviews
- work with the team to review facts and anticipate questions
- provide background information to the team
- provide contact phone numbers to the director of communications when out of state

The Director of Communications will:

- gather pertinent information
- assist spokespersons in preparing public statements
- prepare background information handouts for media
- monitor the flow of information
- monitor and report media activity to members of Media Crisis Management Team
- advise support staff on how to handle calls relating to the case
- provide the bishop and support staff with personal itinerary when trip is planned
- provide training of lay personnel, cabinet, staff, etc.
- be available to support pastor if crisis involves local church
- If the crisis is large, will notify clergy and laity in the conference using email, email newsletter, letter, website, and/or social media. (Notices will also be emailed to district offices.)

The Conference Chancellor/Legal Counsel will:

- provide information on liability related to the crisis
- review statements and releases to the media for legal implications
- provide a list of alternate lawyers to be contacted if chancellor is unavailable
- be available 24 hours a day for consultation when necessary during a crisis

The Media Crisis Management Team will:

- provide 24-hour availability at least during the first few days of the crisis
- develop a strategy for the dissemination of information
- develop an official statement regarding the crisis
- determine how much, what kind and to whom information will be released
- provide communications with phone number if outside the area

Conference/Church Support Staff will:

- not answer questions; this is the sole responsibility of the spokespersons
- take written messages before allowing the caller to leave a voice message
- keep a time chart of all messages pertaining to the crisis using the log sheet
- direct calls as instructed by the Media Crisis Management Team
- keep copies of all messages related to the crisis
- assist the information flow as directed
- assist in collection of public statements and articles about crisis

Remember:

- If the crisis involves personnel, the bishop or appropriate authority may reassign or remove the individual immediately from his/her position. He/she can be reinstated if found innocent of charges.
- Team members and members of the support staff are required to document all conversations relating to the crisis, as well as keep a log of all media contacts.
- A log of all public statements should be kept in addition to any developments in the crisis. Be prepared to answer questions about who is in charge, biographies of personalities, background information, and knowledge of the church.
- If the crisis warrants it, the Media Crisis Management Team will arrange for security personnel to limit access to offices and for people to handle the telephones and serve as “runners” or provide hospitality.
- If the crisis is large, the director of communications will notify clergy and laity in the conference using whatever means necessary: email, email newsletter, letter, website, and/or social media. (Notices will be emailed to district offices that will be responsible for immediate distribution.)
- Prepare a pressroom with Internet connection as available. The site will be determined by location of crisis and availability of facilities.

Crisis Review

The Media Crisis Management Team will meet to review how the crisis unfolded and how it was handled. The team will consider:

1. What went well?
2. What missteps were made?
3. What problems could have been foreseen or avoided?
4. What adjustments in the crisis management plan are needed?
5. What loose ends need to be tied up?

Media Procedures for Church and Conference Staff

Handling Telephone Calls from Reporters

- Take a written message (*don't transfer to voicemail without taking message*)
- Use the Crisis Communications Telephone Log for Media Calls
- Get reporter's name, media outlet, direct phone number, and deadline
- Ask for the topic of the story
- Explain that the church spokesperson will return the call
- Don't answer questions yourself
- Be polite, but firm
- Keep a copy of all written records of media calls

Hold Response

Telephone:

"I want to make sure we give you the most accurate and up-to-date information.

Our _____ (appropriate person) can best help you. If you give me your contact information, deadline, and topic that you're calling about, I'll have that person return your call as soon as possible."

On-site:

"Our job right now is to keep everyone safe. We understand that the media have a job to do. We're gathering information and our spokesperson will speak to reporters shortly."

Handling Reporters On-Site

- Refer questions to the pastor, conference communicator, or district superintendent.
- Don't be hostile
- Don't give your personal opinion
- Don't speak "off the record"
- Don't use the term "no comment"
- Be polite, but firm

Handling Casual Conversations or Questions about Crisis

- Don't speculate, repeat unconfirmed information, or express personal opinions.
- Don't feel like you have to answer questions
- Do respond with a brief, positive, general statement

Contact Information for _____ (Appropriate Contact)

Office# _____ Mobile# _____ Email: _____

Notification Process - The First 60 Minutes

If you learn of the crisis through a media contact (not unusual), you have 60 minutes to make your first formal response. If you learn of the crisis through another contact, be prepared to be contacted by the media. **Your immediate responsibility is to contact your district superintendent.** This will activate the Immediate Crisis Response Team to prepare an initial statement.

Instruct staff to follow Media Procedures for Church and Conference Staff guidelines.

If notified by a media outlet requesting information, use the Hold Response and complete the Crisis Communications Telephone Log for Media Calls. (see Media Procedures for Church and Conference Staff guidelines)

Use this Hold Response to respond to requests for information.

“I want to make sure we give you the most accurate and up-to-date information possible. Our spokesperson can best help you. If you will give me your contact information, deadline, and the topic that you’re calling about, I’ll have that person return your call as soon as possible.”

The first person aware of the crisis contacts his/her district superintendent. (If this person cannot contact his/her district superintendent, then a call must be placed to the bishop’s office: (629) 203-7260)

- District superintendent calls bishop’s office, speaks to bishop or the assistant to the bishop, explaining the crisis in a five-minute or less conversation.
- Bishop or assistant to the bishop makes decision whether or not to contact the Immediate Crisis Response Team. If the decision is made that a media crisis might occur, the team will immediately assemble via conference call.
- The team will assess the nature and extent of crisis by asking the following questions:
 1. What is known about the situation? What is not known?
 2. Who knows about the situation? What do they know?
 3. What can we expect to occur during the next few hours/days?
 4. What information can we release to the media and public immediately?
- Quickly uncover as many FACTS as possible before calling together the Media Crisis Management Team.
- The response team will prepare a one-paragraph statement to be distributed as soon as the facts are known. The statement will include facts (no suppositions) about what happened and what the Church intends to do. The statement will express compassion for all persons involved. **This IS the Church!**

Crisis Communications Telephone Log for Media Calls

1. Duplicate this sheet so a new page is available for logging every media call related to the crisis.
2. Every call from the media related to the crisis is to be noted using a log sheet. An electronic log may also be used, but it is recommended that a paper log be maintained for the convenience of those returning logs AND for possible court cases.
3. Copy the completed log sheet before giving it to the spokesperson. Place the copy in a file to be maintained for several years.
4. Never transfer a call to voicemail OR to the spokesperson before completing this log.
5. Support staff must not answer the reporter’s questions. Decline politely and refer the reporter to the spokesperson.

Communications Telephone Log for Media Calls

Name/location of person taking message _____

Date of call _____ **Time of call** _____

Reporter's name _____

Media outlet _____

Call back telephone number & email address _____

Reporter's deadline _____

What information does the reporter want? _____

What information does the reporter already have? (They won't want to give this to you.)

Person to whom the reporter was referred: _____