



THE CHURCH  
OF ENGLAND  
BIRMINGHAM

# Leading your church through a media crisis

It would be great if we only had to deal in good news but unfortunately things do go wrong. Mistakes, problems, slip-ups, errors of judgement, accidents or political and theological controversies come along once in a while and with them can come the media spotlight.

If you or your church finds itself in the midst of a media furore the last thing that you want to happen is for an incident to build into a full-blown crisis.

Whatever the reason was for the incident, the *first priority* is to fix it. If it's to do with a 'risk' make sure there is no ongoing risk to the public and that there are steps in place to ensure there is no chance of the same thing happening again.

The *next thing* you need to do is deal with the media if they come calling, making every effort to prevent an incident escalating into a media crisis.

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There are, however some useful tips in this document for preparing for a crisis and dealing with the media should you find yourself in the middle of one.

## Be Prepared

The best way of preparing for a media frenzy is to have developed a plan on how you and your church will deal with such situations. That way, if something does happen and the media come calling, you will have a *Crisis Communications Plan* prepared.

That plan should make sure your church has:

- An appointed local spokesperson (possibly a couple of spokespeople, in case one is unavailable) to whom inquiries and the media should be referred.
- A definite process in place so your church members (or at least your PCC) know who is going to speak to the media if an incident occurs. It is vitally important all group members are clear on procedure and who to refer the media to in case they receive calls or inquiries from them.
- A method whereby leaders (perhaps a Sub-committee of the PCC) can quickly get together and gather information so they are well-briefed for media inquiries on any situation or issue.
- A way in which spokespeople can quickly respond to the media with accurate information.

The aim of this sort of plan should be to allow clear and accurate communication to the public and to your church members. It should also aim to prevent any long-term damage to your reputation or that of your church.

## Don't run. Don't hide.

What should you do when the media contacts you about something that has gone wrong and it involves you or your church?

The first and most instinctive reaction for many groups, especially those not used to having the media spotlight shone on them with any intensity is to run from the situation and hide.

Simply put – don't do it.

Trying to avoid the problem, or ignore it, in the hope it will go away will not work and you risk damaging your church's good name in the process.

The reality is that the media will run the story with or without your input. So it makes good sense for you to positively influence that story by addressing the issue quickly, accurately and in a proactive manner.

What you want to do is influence the nature of that story, as much as possible, to ensure that what is run is accurate and fair: It is difficult to complain about not having your side of the story aired when you have refused to provide it. Don't forget the Director of Communications can help with this.

An important aspect of any media crisis is getting across strongly and clearly that your group is doing everything in its power to address the issue.

Organisations and churches that come out of a media crisis with their reputations intact are those that deal with the issue quickly, effectively, honestly and, just as importantly, are perceived to have done exactly that.

## Tips on handling the media through a crisis

### *Acknowledge there is a crisis and discuss it within your leadership group.*

If you can't acknowledge there's a problem, how can you find a solution?

Recognising early on that you actually have a potential crisis on your hands, gives you more of a chance of handling it successfully and rectifying it quickly. The sooner you take action, the better your chances of coming out with your reputation intact.

### *Decide who will be your spokesperson or public face.*

As the person responsible for the church this is most likely to be you. This means you need as much access to the details as possible.

You need to be accessible during a crisis and readily available to answer the media's questions so as not to create a vacuum where yours is the only voice not being heard.

### *Stay calm.*

It's important you stay calm under pressure, if you can't appoint someone who can. Anger makes good copy for newspapers and great footage for television but it can spell disaster for you or your church. (Unless it's righteous anger of course - Jesus turning the table would have made great headline news!)

Remember, you have developed a *Crisis Communications Plan* for this very reason – so stick to it and you can remain calm.

### *Address your 'real' audience through the media.*

The media may be chasing you for a comment, but it's the general public as well as your church members, parishioners and supporters that you want to address and have hear your side of the story.

Remember you are not speaking to just the media, they are a conduit to the wider public. So speak constructively, positively and frame your responses with the real audience in mind.

### *Make first impressions count.*

First impressions count to both the public and the media and are vital in getting your message across. If you are honest, sincere, open, committed to resolving the issue and project a positive attitude it will go a long way to dispelling any negative or preconceived notions about your group.

## *Work out what you can legally release.*

If there are legal issues that come into play, be aware of where the line is drawn on what you can say and don't step over it.

Also be aware that many legal advisers will advise you to say nothing at all – that advice should be questioned, if not challenged. You have to publicly address the issue; it is only the manner or amount of information that is up for discussion.

## *Release as much as you can as quickly as you can.*

Linked to the last point is the need for your group to get as much information out into the public arena as quickly as possible (keep the Director of Communications aware of what's going on).

Your *Crisis Communications Plan* should cover the procedure for quickly gathering accurate information about the issue at hand.

Once you have the information, it is vital that it is passed on to your nominated spokesperson and communicated through the media. The more information you can release quickly, which accurately conveys your side of the story in context, the better.

The sooner you respond and show that you are acting in a sincere, honest and reliable manner, the sooner your voice is listened to and trusted.

## *Say only that which you know to be true.*

If you don't know the answer, don't guess at it.

Stick to confirmed information only and facts you know to be accurate and correct. If necessary, tell the reporters you don't know but will check it out and get back to them.

## *Avoid speculation or answering hypothetical questions.*

Often you are asked to speculate, even if it is in a subtle way, for example:  
“What will your church do if this is proven to be true?”

Don't speculate - stick to the facts and what did happen, not what might have. You can fend questions off by saying things such as, “I don't want to speculate on that” or, “I would prefer not to deal in hypotheticals. What we do know is...”

If you have to use these types of quotes repeatedly to fend off questions, that's fine, the assembled media will soon realise you are not going to speculate.

## *Challenge information you know to be wrong.*

When dealing with information you know is wrong, challenge it strongly. If something is published that is incorrect let the media organisation know their information is wrong and let other organisations know also, so they don't repeat it.

This is particularly important if the problem revolves completely around a wrong or malicious story. To deal with unfounded allegations and emerge with your credibility and standing intact, it is crucial to act quickly to clarify your church's position on the matter (or that of the Church of England).

Wrong "facts" left unchallenged are often more damaging than the truth.

## *Speak in common, easily understood language.*

This is a serious challenge for any church. People will not understand words and names like 'diocese', 'PCC', 'lay person'. Avoid jargon at all costs (this goes for general media work too!). The general rule is to use words that need no explanation. Speak so that people can actually understand the message you are trying to send them.

## *Show concern.*

As a community group, your main mission is to care for, service and support the community. Because of this, it needs to be mindful of the feelings as well as the issues.

If something has happened that has caused injury or distress, show concern and show it publicly through word and deed.

## *Ban the words "no comment".*

Repeating this phrase makes it sound like you know the answer but just do not wish to give it.

Phrases you can use instead include:

"All I can say is..."

"I can't provide that information until I have all the details."

"I can't answer that until I have a full report."

"I am happy to try and answer those questions once I have spoken to the right people."

## *Don't bother blaming the media.*

Your first priority is to address the problem at hand, not to “shoot the messenger”.

Certainly, if there is something wrong in the coverage, point it out and seek to have the record amended. If it is a serious issue you want to be seen to be treating it seriously and dealing with it.

The media is not a homogeneous mass, you are dealing with real people. Simple things like asking them how their day is, or giving them something to drink if they have appeared at your church, has an amazing power to stop them in their tracks! Getting media 'on side' with you may bear fruit in other occasions when you want them to share some good news!

## *Pray.*

It seems a simple thing but sometime in a media crisis people go into 'super-organisation-mode'. Take time to pray and to seek God's guidance as well as that of people around you. Gather a group of people to commit to pray for the situation.

*Don't forget Steve Squires is available to help but would also love to hear your good news stories!*

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