

Having an up-to-date crisis communication plan is crucial. You have fire and tornado plans and even a winter weather plan. It only makes sense to have a crisis communication plan as well. One of the most important things you can do for your church is having a strategy for dealing with a crisis and the media. Here is a list of tips to help you prepare for dealing with the press **BEFORE** a disaster occurs:

### 1. Preparation is key!

Knowing who to call first, what to say and who should say it will save critical time in a crisis. Utilizing a plan will keep everyone's ideas, actions and words aligned, so there won't be anyone unintentionally digging a deeper crisis "hole." A crisis communication plan will allow for more time to investigate facts, communicate internally and better protect the reputation of your church. Find a crisis communication plan template here:

<https://docs.arumc.org/Communications/UMCOM-crisis-communication-plan.pdf>

### 2. Understand that the media doesn't just include reporters: anyone with a cellphone and a social platform is part of the storytelling for your church!

Make sure that the person who is managing your church social media is keenly aware of what the public is saying about your church. Keep all of your posts positive and focused on your trajectory. Make sure that your entire staff understands that if a negative incident/situation occurs and is posted to social media what should be done and what should NOT be done.

**DO:** If there is a derogatory post made that directly affects your church or a staff member, report this to the senior pastor, district superintendent, and Conference Communicator immediately with a screenshot that includes all relevant information.

**DON'T:** comment on the post or share the post until the crisis team has had time to analyze the situation.

**DO:** Delete the post (if you have access) and monitor any other people's pages who have shared the post to see how fast it is escalating. Be prepared to report this information to the DS and the Conference Communicator.

**DO:** Be prepared to take ownership. You will work alongside your DS and Conference Communicator to determine the best course of action because many times just deleting the post or video must be accompanied by a very strategic and transparent reply. **DO NOT ATTEMPT TO OFFER ANY CORRECTION OR REPLY WITHOUT CONSULTING WITH THE DS AND CONFERENCE COMMUNICATOR FIRST.** This decision NEVER ends well.

### 3. When is it appropriate to engage with the media?

Anytime a reporter calls or has a camera, the first-line of communication must be prepared to know what to do. This includes all staff/volunteers who may answer the phone and all greeter teams who might be the first to encounter a news crew. Having the before-mentioned crisis plan in place will allow everyone to act kindly and appropriately. See the \*Crisis Communication Template for detailed information in handling incoming calls and on-site media.



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For yourself and your staff, choosing to not engage in a conversation or argument on social media is usually best when it comes to defending your church or a staff person. This usually ends up adding fuel to the fire. Always feel free to call your Conference Communicator for help.

#### **4. Understand your role!**

When a reporter interviews you, it can very easily be misconstrued as speaking for the Arkansas Conference and Bishop instead of just speaking for yourself or your church. Make sure that your church staff understands that the Senior Pastor is the spokesperson for your church. Reinforce with any journalist that you are **ONLY** speaking for yourself and your local church (and be **VERY SURE** that you **DO** speak for everyone in your church). In the case of talking to the media regarding a crisis, you are **ALWAYS** asked to notify your DS and Conference Communicator so that we can help coach if needed. As the leader of your church, it is necessary to report to your internal audience first and then to the media.

#### **5. Time is of the essence!**

Be sure to always ask what a journalist's deadline is so that a phone call can be made or an interview scheduled in plenty of time. Reporters will report the story, with **OR** without input from you. Always try to give the media a short, accurate account of information in a very timely manner. Timing is most important when putting out a social media inferno as well. A delayed response or no response could potentially make the situation worse.

For more questions or scheduling a training consultation on crisis communication, contact Amy Ezell, Director of Arkansas Conference Center for Communication at [amy.ezell@arumc.org](mailto:amy.ezell@arumc.org).