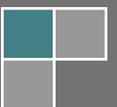


A GUIDE FOR CHURCH LEADERS: SURVIVING A CRISIS

A SITUATION THAT THREATENS THE INTEGRITY, REPUTATION, AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE CHURCH IS A CRISIS. IT CAN MANIFEST ITSELF IN AS A LEGAL DISPUTE, THEFT, ACCIDENT, MANMADE CALAMITY, OR ANY OTHER NEGATIVE SITUATION THAT IS ASSOCIATED WITH YOUR CHURCH. AS A LEADER, YOU HAVE TO PLAN TO PERSEVERE.



A GUIDE FOR CHURCH LEADERS: SURVIVING A CRISIS

A CRISIS IS ANY SITUATION THAT THREATENS THE INTEGRITY OR REPUTATION OF THE CHURCH. IT CAN MANIFEST ITSELF AS A LEGAL DISPUTE, THEFT, ACCIDENT, FIRE, OR MANMADE CALAMITY THAT IS ASSOCIATED WITH YOUR CHURCH. IN THE CHURCH SETTING, RUMORS, ACCUSATIONS, AND UNTRUTHS CAN ALSO BECOME A CRISIS IF HANDLED IMPROPERLY. THIS GUIDE IS DESIGNED TO HELP YOU IDENTIFY AND ADDRESS THEM.

RECOGNIZE

The reality of life is that crisis situations will happen.

JOB 14:1 states, "Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble". It stands to reason that at least some of those troubled days would result in a crisis for you and your congregation.

No matter how many inspiring and admonishing sermons are delivered, every congregation can expect to weather storms of crisis. But surprisingly, many church leaders are caught by surprise. When you think about it, crisis in the church should actually be expected. Millions of people flock to church carrying pain, heartbreak, illness, undesirable histories, and unresolved troubles. The fact that those factors can cause a crisis should not take you by surprise. Recognizing that crises will happen helps you to prepare.

PREPARE

How well you survive the crisis is directly related to how well you prepare.

One of the best ways to prepare for a crisis is to learn from the crisis of others. No doubt you have read about, witnessed, prayed for, and assisted fellow clergy and colleagues through their own crisis. Examine the cause, review the process, evaluate the outcome, and design your own plan of action if and when the same comes to your door.

In *Thomas F. Taylor's book, 7 Deadly Lawsuits: How Ministers Can Avoid Litigation and Regulation*, he recognizes that religious leaders and organizations are being sued at an unprecedented rate. He identifies Fraud, Defamation, Child Abuse, Sexual Misconduct, Clergy Malpractice, Invasion of Privacy, and Undue Influence as the greatest threats. Use this list as a starting point to review your practices and prepare for the possibility.

ASSEMBLE

It is the nature of the crisis to overwhelm you.

You should utilize the gifting of the congregation, your colleagues, and the community to support you through the situation. The purpose of your crisis team is to reduce overall anxiety, show commitment and skill in handling the crisis, and direct the course of accurate information. Your team should consist of the following:

LEADER. A fellow minister or other person that would report directly to you and be responsible for the overall function of the team.

ADMINISTRATOR. The head of the church governing body who is familiar with church protocol and policy.

LIAISON. Someone with excellent verbal and written communications skills who is responsible for the flow of information to the press, police, attorneys, etc.

SUBJECT MATTER SPECIALIST. Depending on the type of crisis, this person will have a specialize knowledge of the practical issues of the crisis and can gather and report facts, not rumor to the team. I.E., an attorney or investigator.

PRAYER WARRIORS. Although anyone can pray, these person/persons should be a proven spiritual leader who can cover all the parties in prayer without having to know the specifics of the situation.

MENTAL HEALTH/SOCIAL WORK ADVOCATE. They should have a working knowledge of community social, medical, and mental health resources and the ability to deliver them directly or provide a refer alto those in need.

Team members should be respected among the congregation and in the community and posses a reputation for discretion and maturity. Also, choose alternates in case one or more of your team members is unavailable, directly involved in the crisis, or unable to be objective. Your team should meet before and after a crisis to create plans and policies based on likely crisis scenarios and change current practices or behaviors to lessen the likelihood of an incident.

UNDERSTAND

Understanding the type of crisis is key in planning your course of action

The types of church crisis are:

MORAL CRISIS. Real or perceived actions taken by anyone that is in contradiction with the teachings of the Bible. The moral failings of any person often make for salacious gossip. But in the church, where the standard is set high, moral failings of leadership can seriously derail the overall mission and reputation of the church.

ADMINISTRATIVE CRISIS. Any action that leaves the church without proper leadership, accountability, or support. The death, resignation, or termination of the pastor is an example.

FINANCIAL CRISIS. Any action that leaves the church without adequate operating funds or that threatens the church's monetary health.

LEGAL CRISIS. Any situation that may result in criminal or civil penalties. The slip and fall of a church visitor or sexual misconduct involving a child are examples. Even the legal problems of individual congregants, i.e., a domestic restraining order, may affect your daily operations.

NATURAL CRISIS. Those situations that would be considered an act of nature and were either unforeseen or unpreventable. Floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, etc.

ACCIDENTAL OR MANMADE CRISIS. Like a natural crisis, these crisis situations are unforeseen but were the result of a person's actions. Church van collisions or physical fights between congregants are examples.

You can see how most crises will fall into more than one category. Additionally, a small crisis of one type can grow and spread and flow into the other types if not handled quickly and correctly.

GAUGE

Gauging the seriousness of the crisis will help you allocate resources and give it the attention it deserves.

In doing your evaluation, ask these questions:

- Could those involved face criminal penalties?
- Could those involved (including the church) face civil penalties?
- Could those involved face church discipline?
- Are members of the ministry or administrative leaders implicated?
- Are any members significantly affected and could there be more?
- Are any children, elderly, disabled, or other vulnerable group involved?
- Are those affected left without basic necessities?
- Are there other victims that need to be identified?
- Does this involve mismanagement of church funds or other resources?
- Are church doctrines or beliefs in question?
- Did this crisis occur without warning?
- Are rumors circulating that, if true, will constitute a crisis?

Your answers should give you a clearer picture of the severity and help you determine who, i.e. attorney, insurance company, law enforcement, should get involved.

IDENTIFY

Most say that there are two sides to every story; but in a crisis situation, there will be many more than that.

There are always the immediate parties, their families, the congregation but depending on the severity of the crisis, there may be witnesses, law enforcement, your legal counsel, opposing counsel, insurance agents, media, and the community to deal with as well. Your team should be prepared to deal with each need. When you talk to immediate parties, their families, and witnesses your goal is to show concern, offer care and support, and gather information. You should avoid investigating. Investigating is the job of the police, attorneys, and insurance companies. In gathering information, try starting with, "I have information that. . . and I wanted to talk to you and see if there is anything you need"; or "It has come to my attention that, . . . and I wanted to talk to you about it." This conversation should give you enough information to determine your next course of action.

PERSEVERE

The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word 'crisis.' One brush stroke stands for danger; the other for opportunity. In a crisis, be aware of the danger - but recognize the opportunity. John F. Kennedy (1917 - 1963)

On the point of perseverance, you may have more insight than I do. Following divine and professional guidance will assure you come out this crisis storm better than before. Once it has subsided, sit down with your team and talk about what happened and how to prevent it from happening again. You may find a wonderful ministry in the aftermath.