

## New Mexico Conference Crisis Communication Checklist

**#1 Contact** - Once the pastor becomes aware of a crisis, they should contact their DS who will then contact the Communications Director.

**Crisis Team** – Your Crisis Team will consist of church leaders who you trust and who are knowledgeable about your church such as Admin Council Chair, Lay Leader, church or staff members. Outside of chosen people in your church, your DS, Conference Communications Director and perhaps the Conference Chancellor will serve on your team.

You'll need to designate a **spokesperson** who will respond to any media outlet requests for information or interviews. The spokesperson isn't necessarily your pastor. This is a person who is confident, well-spoken, quick-thinking and knowledgeable about your church.

Your administrative assistant or receptionist will need a **script** to respond to calls and emails. Oftentimes, this is simply a congenial message about the availability of the pastor or the church spokesperson. Example: "We have just been made aware of the situation. Please let me know your name, media outlet and our pastor will contact you when we have more information."

### Stakeholders

One of the most difficult decisions for the Crisis Team is who should be made aware of the crisis, what can be shared, and when. If the crisis will be made public, it's a good idea to let church members know through the most efficient means such as an e-newsletter. If the crisis is extremely serious and has confidential elements such as the abuse of a child, a called face-to-face or Zoom meeting may be the best way to share information. Share pertinent information to control the narrative, but be careful to protect those who may have been harmed.

### Media Relations

- The first step is to gather as much information as possible and draft a statement so that when a reporter contacts the church, the spokesperson can reply succinctly. Update the statement as information becomes known.
- If there are church policies and procedures (such as *Safer Sanctuaries*) that guide the church, explain how they were followed. Have your policies & procedures accessible and review them regularly, especially as it pertains to youth, children and vulnerable adults. The Book of Discipline and Social Principles allow churches to share the UMC stance with confidence.
- Never speculate. If you don't know an answer, you can either "bridge" to a fact you do know or say that you'll get that information for the media. Example: "I can't speak to that but what I do know is..."
- Expression compassion and concern, if appropriate.
- Never be rude or say, "No comment."

- Don't use church-y language or church acronyms such as SPRC or CFA.
- Reporters are trying to get the story by a certain deadline. It's best to ask them when the deadline is and try to provide information to them quickly. Otherwise, they will find another, perhaps less accurate source.
- Even if you don't think an allegation is credible or won't go further, contact your DS or Communications Director. Let your team decide if further preparation is required.
- If reporters ask for an on-site report or interview, be involved in deciding where cameras are set up. For example, don't allow cameras to have the church marquis or minor church members in the frame.
- Anticipate the hard questions and practice answering with team members. It's ok to pause to consider answers. Reporters may try to make you feel at ease and then suddenly ask the tough questions. It's nerve-wracking being interviewed by the media but preparation will ease your nerves. Never assume that you're "off the record." Try to remain positive and re-word negative questions.

**Law Enforcement** – If the crisis involves law enforcement, request information from officers and your Conference Chancellor before speaking publicly.

### **Statement Formula**

Name and title – “My name is Bob Smith and I serve as the church's Lay Leader ....”

Confirmed facts – “Here's what we know right now...”

Concern & Compassion – “Our priority is for the safety of everyone involved...”

Relevant policies and procedures – “Our church policy is ...”

Wrap-Up, take questions

### **Organization of Crisis Communication Team**

Once you have formed a Team:

- Get everyone's home and work contact information.
- Ensure that team members understand that everything shared with the Crisis Comm Team is confidential. That means that conveying information to family members or other church members who they believe need to know about the situation cannot happen.
- Decide who will be the best spokesperson for the situation.
- While some crises “smolder” and there's more time to develop a strategy, many emergencies happen at the most inconvenient times. Inform team members that if a Crisis Comm Team meeting is called, they need to respond immediately.
- Bear in mind that every circumstance will be slightly different. Does it involve the daycare center, legal issues, immigration; pastor, staff or congregant behavior; an accident, the kind of media attention received, UMC concerns, etc.?
- Make sure that your policies and procedures are up-to-date and easily accessible.
- Develop your church's **Crisis Communication Plan** based on the information on this sheet. It doesn't need to be comprehensive but there are foundational steps:

- #1 - Call your DS, who will call the Comm Director and then bring your team together.
- Draft a receptionist and spokesperson script whether or not you think that media will call.
- Decide who the stakeholders are – who needs to be told what and when.
- Hope for a one-day crisis window but if the crisis continues, update information as necessary.
- MOST IMPORTANT: Ensure that protecting anyone who has been harmed is your main priority.

**Contacts:**

Alli Newsom  
Communications Director  
[alli@nmconfum.com](mailto:alli@nmconfum.com)

Rev Ross Whiteaker  
ABQ DS  
[ross@nmconfum.com](mailto:ross@nmconfum.com)

Rev Dr Pamela Rowley  
El Paso DS  
[prowley@nmconfum.com](mailto:prowley@nmconfum.com)