

A Crisis Communications Plan

For RCA Church

Ray Hocker

Executive Summary

The world is a dynamic place where social, economic, and cultural systems are under constant change. The nightly news is filled with stories about wanton acts of violence, even against houses of worship. But the challenges facing religious organizations extend far beyond violent acts. Scandals involving sexual misconduct inside the Catholic Church and other large Christian organizations have rocked these institutions to their foundation. Fire, Flood, food borne illness, and disease are everyday threats faced by any large organization. There are also areas of concern that are specific to the medium sized religious organizations like a community church. There are innumerable situations that can rise to the crisis level and threaten the church. Simple day to day operations can yield discontent and division that can threaten the organization. These seeming routine matters like staff changes, financial issues, facility planning, and even church growth can quickly rise to the crisis level and a crisis ignored, or mishandled can lead to the complete destruction of the organization.

Unfortunately, in the day to day operation of a medium sized community church there is seldom the time, staff, or expertise available to develop a plan for coping with the vast uncertainty of potential risk and the scope of nature and circumstance. Recognizing these concerns and putting forth the time and effort to identify and assess these issues is the first step toward developing a comprehensive crisis communications plan.

What are the benefits of developing a plan and does the effort warrant the investment? As with any risk management planning the actual value is only realized when a disaster occurs. Consider the example of a fire escape ladder. It hangs there on the side of a building and

hopefully is never used. The investment is never realized until the day someone escapes the burning building. With a crisis communications plan, the value becomes evident only when a crisis occurs and the planning and methods it contains can be used. Crisis occurs without warning and generates uncertainty and emotional turmoil. In moments like these, the plan can be a life-line helping to guide the church through the most difficult early hours after a crisis event. It is also a resource bringing together, in a single document, the important elements necessary for an effective first response. However, the plan's usefulness continues beyond first response. It will also help in developing subsequent responses by helping to identify the various stakeholders and how they might be affected by the crisis. It will also provide important contacts, methods, and resources for communicating with these stakeholders.

The purpose of this document is to serve as a development tool to assist in the creation of a Crisis Communication Plan (CCP) for the RCA Church of Ridgecrest, California. It is not a complete plan. It is more in the form of an expanded outline to be used as a road map. Using this outline, a knowledgeable team from the Church, will be able to draft a comprehensive plan.

Organization Background & History

RCA is a medium sized church located in Ridgecrest, California, a city of about 28,000. It is affiliated with the Assembly of God denomination. The Church dates back almost 50 years in its current location. It is a Pastor lead organization with an advisory Board of Directors of Church members, selected by the Pastor and confirmed by the Church membership. The Church has a full and part-time paid staff of five. A large group of volunteer ministry groups lead by Church members selected by the staff, head up various programs and services. The Church is also unique in that it has a satellite campus (church) located 75 miles north in Lone Pine, California.

Because the Church is Pastor-lead, the congregation or an elected board does not control the day to day operations and financial operations of the Church and its staff. This requires that issues are carefully presented, and that church business is conducted in a transparent manner. When this is not done effectively, there is always the risk of church members feeling that they are disconnected or poorly informed. This is a constant challenge to the pastor, board members, and staff. This is always a significant concern.

The Church has both a website presence and a Facebook page. Church events are also shared on Facebook event pages. It has an effective direct email conduit to the membership keeping them apprised of the activities of the various missions and groups including youth groups targeted toward different age levels. Small groups are also active and small group leaders often serve as a communications conduit from the staff to members through the small group meetings.

The community is an average California community other than it being adjacent to the Naval Air Warfare Center (NAWC) at China Lake. This proximity impacts the church in many

ways that effect the CCP. The socioeconomic and educational levels of the community are somewhat unique and this needs to be considered in the development of this plan. The NAWC is the community's major employer and as a result directly, or indirectly, affects many of the stakeholders.

Risk & Issues Assessment

An important step in developing the CCP is to identify the risks and issues that could create a crisis. Crisis events are unpredictable and almost always accompanied by a degree of uncertainty. Uncertainty can be a major stress factor and handling and coping with uncertainty during early communications can be very difficult. Identifying potential risks in the CCP will help prepare the organization for a rapid and informed response. Timing is a critical element during a crisis. The adage of “no news, is good news” does not apply. A prompt and measured response, that recognizes and communicates any uncertainty, followed by frequent updates is often the best approach. (Ulmer & Seeger, 2014)

Identifying organizational risks for the Church is a valuable effort. This effort can also help to identify risks that might be prevented or minimized long before they can become a crisis event. The table, presented below can serve as a starting point for listing all forms of potential risks. Each area should be expanded and developed further during the creation of the CCP.

During the development of CCP, areas of concern and specific risks maybe identified. Attention must be paid to immediately assessing and resolving any risk issues. An unresolved risk area is a possible crisis. For example, while developing plans to communicate in the case of a fire emergency it is discovered there is no evacuation plan for a church building. In this case, the evacuation plan needs to immediately be developed and posted along with any required training for staff.

Potential Risks Table

Risk Category	Risk	Examples
Natural Disaster	Flood	Flood damages church property
	Fire	Fire causes evacuation of property
	Earthquake	Earthquake during church activities
	Adverse Weather	Windstorm causes damage or risk to occupants
Disease	Epidemic	Flu or other illness among members or staff
	Infestation	Lice or ringworm found in youth group member
	Contagious Pathogen	Water supply contaminated
	Food Borne Illness	Food served by Church makes people sick
Violent Acts	Act by Outsider	Outsider enters church to conduct violence
	Act by member	Member acts out in violent manner
	Act by staff	Staff member acts in violent manner.
Staff Misconduct	Sexual Misconduct	Staff member accused of sexual misconduct
	Personal Misconduct	Staff member arrested or charged with crime
	Ineffective Communications	Staff starts a program that alienates members or the public.
	Member Misconduct	A member, viewed as representing the Church, is accused of a crime or misconduct
Civil/Government	Legislation	Zoning laws or statues put Church at risk
	Litigation	Lawsuit filed against Church.

Stakeholder Analysis

The following groups represent the various stakeholders that must be considered and included in the CCP. Each of these groups have unique needs and the methods to communicate with each group can be different. (Ulmer & Seeger, 2014)

Church Members

The members of the Church are perhaps the most important stakeholder for most if not all crisis situations. As members, this group is effected by most of the situations identified in the Risk Assessment. They are often the first to be impacted and subject to the most serious emotional and social distress. This group has a large stake in the organization and many members have made substantial financial and time investment in the Church.

Church Staff and Their Families

Also, among the most closely associated stakeholders is the paid and volunteer staff members of the Church. This group depends on the Church for their livelihood and the wellbeing and security of their families. Their careers and professional reputations are closely linked to the Church as are their personal finances.

Church Board

Board members serve as volunteers but, still will be held accountable for the actions of the Church. They are also expected to be fully aware of the actions and reactions of the church body. The board members are also often the first to be contacted by the media and/or governmental

agencies in the event of a crisis. It is vital that they be fully briefed and up to date on all Church communications during a crisis.

Church District Administration

The administration of the Assembly of God District is a stakeholder on all crisis matters relating to the public conduct of the Church. Many crisis matters are of less vital significance to the District. The pastor and board of directors can identify matters that should be communicated to the District.

General Public

The Church is an important member of the community as are its members. Communication with the stakeholder group is unique because this group is the least informed and perhaps least involved group. It might be necessary to include more background information when communicating with the group.

Media

The media stakeholder group is very important in a crisis situation. Developing a good working relationship with the group can be extremely helpful when dealing with the uncertainty that often occurs during a crisis. The level of trust developed with the media can help to properly frame the Church's communications with the various stakeholders and particularly with the general public served by the media.

Governmental Agencies

Much like the media, the stakeholder benefits from the development of a positive and trusted relationship. The CCP should seek to identify individuals in the church membership that have a positive relationship with these agencies.

Contractors, Service Providers, and Suppliers/Vendors

This stakeholder group can be seriously affected by many of the risks covered in the CCP. Early and frequent communications with them is necessary.

Media Analysis

Many of the actions resulting from an effective CCP rely on interactions with various forms of media to communicate with the stakeholders. This section of the CCP seeks to identify and gather specific details on the specifics of each media. The CCP committee will add details and further information during the development process.

Church Newsletters

The emailed church newsletters are an excellent method to communicate ongoing details regarding Church activities. This ongoing communication builds trust and promotes a general attitude of connection and openness between the Church's stakeholder groups. In the event of a crisis the email newsletter format can easily be adapted for communication specific crisis information to the membership. It must be acknowledged that this communication is not private

and it should always be assumed these communications will be shared outside the specific individuals on the mailing lists.

Church Website and Facebook Pages

These mediums are useful for general crisis information and for providing contacts and recourses for further information. They should not be used for deep background or important updates.

Using these outlets for rapidly evolving, uncertain situations can be problematic because they can be difficult to update quickly and broadcasting outdated information can sometimes add to confusion and further uncertainty.

Newspapers, Radio, and TV

Often referred to as “traditional media” these outlets can provide a vital link with the general public. Caution must be used so that information is properly framed and referenced in a format that is designed for the general public. Additional caution should be used during the early stages of a developing crisis. It is always advisable to refrain from wide ranging interviews and in-depth quotes. A prepared written statement to these media is advisable.

Crisis Communication Plan Overview & Summary (CCP)

RCA will establish a team of skilled members to develop the CCP. In the event of a crisis, the Executive Pastor will gather these members along with any additional individuals required by the situation. The crisis communications team for the RCA Church will consist of the following members:

Executive Pastor

As the leader and chief executive office of the church, the Pastor's input and guidance is a vital part of the team. He will also preside over meetings of the crisis committee and all crisis communications issued in the Church's name will be signed off by the Executive Pastor or, his designated representative. Should the Executive Pastor be unavailable or personally involved or effected by the crisis situation the next senior member of the pastoral staff will assume this position. The Pastor will be responsible for the communications to all the stakeholders but will also specifically focus on the needs of the paid and volunteer staff members of the church.

Crisis Communications Advisor

The Executive Pastor will appoint a church member with the required skills and education to assist in the development of the CCP. This person will be responsible for developing a media contact list and establishing a relationship with the media. This person will also advise and assist the team during the process of the CCP development. The Advisor will have a specific focus on stakeholders outside the church including the media, government agencies, and the general public.

Digital Media/Publicity Director

This individual is the website designer and maintains its content along with the various Facebook pages and the Church's iPhone App. They are also responsible for aggregating the content for the email newsletters and weekly program. Their expertise will be vital in providing information out through these portals in the event of the crisis.

Board Representative

One member of the Church Board will assist and approve all aspects of the CCP. The Board Member will have a specific focus on stakeholders inside the Church with particular attention to the general membership. The Board Member or Executive Pastor may also choose to add a legal representative to advise and council the committee as necessary.

Conclusion

The development of an effective CCP is a time-consuming effort that demands the attention of a committed, engaged, and knowledgeable group with a broad range of skills and expertise. The initial development process, outlined here, requires a considerable time commitment. Once the risks are identified, it will require substantial investigation and research to gather the required information and resources necessary to complete the plan.

Once complete the plan will require constant review and updating to insure the data and risk assessments remain current. For this reason, it should be considered a living and evolving document. A dusty crisis communication plan stashed on an office shelf will prove to be a useless document and the efforts extended during its creation will be useless.

References.

Ulmer, R. R., & Seeger, M. W. (2014). *Effective crisis communication: Moving from crisis to opportunity*. SAGE Publications, Inc.