



Presbytery of the Des Moines,
in the Synod of Lakes and Prairies
of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)



Crisis Communication Plan

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I. Rationale

The Presbytery of Des Moines consists of people and systems - elected staff, support staff, congregations, minister members and the wider Presbyterian community. This crisis communication plan has been developed to facilitate the work and mission of the Presbytery of Des Moines during a crisis. Such a plan, and being able to carry out its intent, allows the Presbytery to:

- Reinforce its role as a caring and compassionate organization
• Enable sensitive and timely responses
• Assign communication responsibilities
• Enhance staff communication skills when relating to and working with media and other audiences
• Minimize potential liabilities

Preparing for the response to a crisis before one occurs minimizes stress and confusion for the staff while maximizing competence, courtesy and personal care for those involved and the community

as a whole. Further, this crisis communication plan helps assure that crucial information is delivered with as much accuracy and timeliness as possible under the circumstances.

The intent of this plan is to not compromise nor detract from the mission of the Presbytery but rather to support the integrity of ministry which the Presbytery is called to provide. Implementation of this plan is to be accomplished in ways, which demonstrate truth, fairness, concern and pastoral care for all involved.

This crisis communication plan is designed to assist the Presbytery staff in a crisis situation involving some aspect of the Presbytery, e.g., the Presbytery staff, the community or the greater church. As a partner in ministry, the Presbytery also stands ready to assist congregations and subsidiary and affiliate corporations when a crisis arises within their settings. In doing so, the Presbytery will apply the principles in this crisis communication plan.

## **II. Goals**

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The Presbytery will try to reach out in a coordinated manner to those impacted by a crisis and respond to the media with promptness, accuracy and on a continuing basis, as needed.

Throughout a crisis the Presbytery will seek to maintain the integrity of the church and the effectiveness of the Presbytery's ministry.

The Presbytery will attempt to use any crisis situation as an opportunity to witness as the church, and will seek to minimize negative publicity.

The Presbytery will manage the flow of information in ways designed to limit stress and prevent misunderstandings.

The crisis communication plan will be carried out with openness, truthfulness, accessibility and responsiveness.

## **III. Possible Crises**

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Possible crises that the Presbytery of Des Moines staff, congregations and subsidiary and affiliate corporations could encounter fall into several categories. The following categories and examples are noted in an attempt to anticipate the kinds of crises that are possible and are not intended to be an exhaustive list. They are offered in order to reduce the element of surprise and to better prepare for dealing with them.

**A. Natural disasters** Examples: flood, tornado, fire, blizzard, windstorm, and earthquake

**B. Human caused disasters** Examples: epidemic, wildfire or fire by arson, burglary of the Presbytery of Des Moines office

- C. Terrorist acts, demonstrations, violent deaths or injuries** Examples: bomb threat, explosion, hostage situation, threat against staff, acts of war, demonstration against the Presbytery of Des Moines action, staff or member injured, killed or death by suicide
- D. Criminal or legal crises** Examples: staff, member, volunteer, church and/or vendor charged with a crime, sexual harassment, lawsuit or wrongful termination action brought against the Presbytery of Des Moines
- E. Personnel crises** Examples: resignation by or firing of staff or member, staff or member hospitalized, staff or member accused of sexual misconduct
- F. Pastoral crises** Examples: situations involving ministers which demand further follow-up beyond the Congregational Care and Development Committee (CCD), minister charged with crime, minister killed or death by suicide
- G. Perception crises** Examples: misunderstanding by a congregation, Presbytery members, or the public of a Presbytery of Des Moines position or action
- H. System crisis** Examples: office computer system failure, building or office blackout
- I. Financial crises** Examples: embezzlement by staff member or volunteer at Presbytery or church, failure of bank that holds Presbytery funds, sharp drop in the Presbytery of Des Moines income
- J. Positive crises** Examples: over-registration for a Presbytery event causing housing and parking problems, Presbytery receives large, unrestricted bequest
- K. Denominational crises** Examples: churches within the Presbytery submit dissolution forms to cut ties with denomination over a General Assembly vote, Presbytery receives a pledge for a large bequest, however the donor is not able financial to donate the funds

#### **IV. Crisis Team**

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The crisis team will consist of:

1. General Presbyter/Stated Clerk
2. Director of Communications
3. Presbytery Moderator
4. Congregational Care and Development Moderator
5. Moderator of Coordinating Council

6. Presbytery's legal counsel (if needed and invited)

Any one of the staff may convene the crisis team. In the event all members of the team are unavailable, the Synod will implement the Synod's plan.

When appropriate to a particular crisis, upon recommendation from the crisis team, the crisis coordinator will invite others to join the crisis team. (For example: Moderator of the Committee on Preparation of Ministry; additional legal counsel, Moderator of Coordinating Council).

The names and contact information for persons currently holding these offices and for other Presbytery staff are found in the Presbytery Directory, online at:

[www.presbyteryofdesmoines.org/PofDSMDirectory.pdf](http://www.presbyteryofdesmoines.org/PofDSMDirectory.pdf), or in the homes of the Presbytery staff, the Presbytery CCD moderator and the Synod.

## **V. Communication Strategy**

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When the Presbytery faces a crisis, the following communication strategy will be employed at the direction of the crisis team, so as to implement a coordinated response.

- A. The crisis team will convene immediately upon learning of a crisis or in anticipation of a crisis.
- B. The crisis team will gather facts about the crisis and immediately analyze the situation, drawing upon other resources as necessary to complete the analysis. The situation analysis includes, but is not limited to, the scope of the situation, any legal implications, the public's perception and other related events (past and future).
- C. Within the first two hours, the crisis team will identify pastoral needs and develop the key message(s) to be conveyed during the crisis. The key messages allow the Presbytery to present its particular viewpoint on the information that is released. To the extent possible, the key message(s) will downplay any negative while proactively promoting any positive.
- D. The crisis team will assign staff to carry out specific duties, as necessary. Duties might include, but are not limited to: pastoral concerns, gathering information, notifying families and others involved, dealing with emergency officials, communicating with volunteers and staff, and notifying the insurance company.
- E. The crisis team will appoint:
  - (1) a crisis coordinator
  - (2) a spokesperson for the Presbytery
  - (3) a media coordinator.

Ordinarily the General Presbyter/Stated Clerk will serve as crisis coordinator and as the spokesperson. Alternatively, the Presbytery Moderator or the Moderator of Coordinating Council

may fill the role as crisis coordinator. Ordinarily the Director of Communications will serve as the media coordinator.

- F. Using the media guidelines provided in **Section VI**, the crisis team will determine the means and frequency of communication with internal and external audiences, including the media. The notification process will then commence.
1. The internal audiences include: Presbytery of the Des Moines staff, Presbytery officers, the Presbytery Coordinating Council, the Congregational Care and Development Committee, and other appropriate Presbytery of Des Moines entities; Synod of Lakes and Prairies staff; presbyteries within the synod; leadership of subsidiary and affiliate corporations; and the Presbytery clergy, elders and other lay leaders of the congregations in the Presbytery.
  2. The external audiences include: the staff of other governing bodies in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); the Executive Director of the General Assembly Council of the PC(USA); the Presbyterian News Service; ecumenical and community leaders within the Presbytery's bounds and general media. (The Director of Communications will maintain general media in the media markets within the Presbytery.)
- G. The crisis team will convene and brief the Presbytery staff as soon as practical. The crisis team also will see that appropriate communications are made with the other internal audiences as soon as possible.
- H. Using the media guidelines provided in **Section VI**, the spokesperson will be the primary speaker on the Presbytery's behalf. This allows the Presbytery's point of view to be heard clearly and unambiguously. There will be situations where others might be asked to speak publicly to certain aspects of a crisis. When appropriate, the spokesperson, in consultation with the crisis team, will select these people. Those additional persons speaking on behalf of the Presbytery will communicate fully with the crisis team before and after acting in this role.
- I. To maintain readiness for communication with internal and external audiences, the Director of Communication is responsible for keeping current the internal rosters and the external rosters identified in **Part F of the Communication Strategy (Section V)**.
- J. The crisis team will draft and make available upon request an official statement regarding the crisis.
- K. Space within the Presbytery office and/or elsewhere will be identified by the crisis team for its use in carrying out the crisis communication strategy.
- L. The crisis team will follow the crisis communication strategy until the crisis is over, at which time the crisis team will carry out a post-crisis evaluation.

## **VI. Media Guidelines**

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The following media guidelines will be followed so that the crisis communication plan can be implemented effectively.

- A. Ordinarily, the General Presbyter/Stated Clerk is the spokesperson for the Presbytery.
- B. The Director of Communications will be responsible for maintaining a biography and photo of each Presbytery staff and member as well as a lexicon of church terminology and appropriate fact sheets, which may be provided to the media.
- C. During a crisis, the Director of Communications ordinarily will serve as media coordinator. As such, this associate will serve as a facilitator, acting on requests for information and comments, providing the media with logistical support, checking information for correctness before its release, and monitoring the media for accuracy.
- D. The Presbytery Office Manager, with communication responsibilities, will act as assistant to the media coordinator in maintaining a media log throughout the crisis. The log will include a listing of all media calls received, issues raised by the media, and media coverage of the crisis.
- E. The Presbytery Office Manager, with communication responsibilities, also will be responsible for keeping copies of all documents prepared and distributed to internal and external audiences throughout the crisis and will maintain a file of final reports.
- F. Depending upon the particular crisis and time constraints, the crisis team will make appropriate use of communication tools such as in-person contact, telephone, fax, e-mail, website, newsletters, regular mail, and express services.
- G. Whenever practical, communications with both internal and external audiences are to contain the key message(s) identified by the crisis team.
- H. Relating to the media in a cooperative manner is an important element of the crisis communication plan. The crisis team, especially the spokesperson, needs to follow these basic principles in maintaining positive media relations that the media channeling coordinator has established:
  - Be accessible and accommodating to the media.
  - Avoid delaying responses to media requests, unless absolutely necessary.
  - Answer all questions directly and briefly as possible, in a straightforward manner.
  - Respond to questions factually and not in a reactionary or defensive manner.
  - Do not argue with reporters, and never speak "off the record".

- Avoid speculation and allocation of blame.
- Provide supplemental information in the form of fact sheets.
- Do not use church and ecclesiastical jargon without a clear definition/explanation.

When an answer is not available, explain the reason and offer to respond within a specific time frame.

## **VII. Training**

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The Presbytery Coordinating Council will arrange for crisis team members to receive training designed to enable them in carrying out the assigned responsibilities of this crisis communication plan.

## **VIII. Regular Meetings of Crisis Team and Review of Plan**

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The crisis team will be convened quarterly by the General Presbyter/Stated Clerk in order to review and update the crisis communication plan, as needed. At these meetings it also will be the responsibility of the crisis team to engage in risk and issues analysis and determine potential crises scenarios, i.e.: What aspects of the Presbytery's ministry are susceptible to adverse publicity? What future events and situations in the life of the Presbytery might create a crisis?

## **IX. Practice**

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While all crises include an element of surprise, and while it is difficult to anticipate the range of potential crises, which might occur, regular review and rehearsal of this crisis communication plan will ensure greater ease and efficiency of operation at the time an actual crisis occurs. Therefore, the crisis team will test and rehearse the crisis communication plan at least once each year.