

TOPTIPS

CRISIS MEDIA RELATIONS

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From time to time things go wrong in the local church, there might be a local disaster or tragedy. At times like this the local church can feel very vulnerable and do not always know how to cope with media attention. (Newspapers, radio, TV, online media). How would you respond if say ... sadly one of your young people was raped, if someone in your fellowship was charged with downloading child pornography or committed another crime, if your church premises was used for a controversial event, if your church secretary was murdered or a church member was kidnapped? All of these things have happened in the last three years within BUGB churches.

Below are some simple broad tips to steer you through...

Be prepared!

If you know something is brewing that could have media interest 'if it got out', then prepare a statement and process now – not when it is actually 'live and happening'!

Create a simple statement

Sit down with your Minister and a few Deacons to write a draft covering the basic facts about what has happened. Try for six to ten lines writing in the knowledge that the reader/listener/viewer might not understand jargon! If it is a situation that is not fully out in the public arena, do not offer more than you need to as a starter. (You can always update the statement as more information becomes available eg Criminal offence, Court hearing). In a very public case/event let the church know how you are dealing with the situation.

There are three key areas to cover

- Title/Heading/Date
- Content of statement.
- Contact details (Name/mobile/landline/email). Also add Church website address if this has good positive info re the church. Many reporters will search the internet for more info.

In Child Protection/Vulnerable Adult situations contact your Regional Assn Team for support. www.baptist.org.uk and click on Associations will take you to contact info. For other major situations contact the National Resource on 01235 517700 and ask for the BUGB Communications Dept.

Ask for time to respond

If a reporter phones and you want ten minutes to compose yourself/check what you are going to say with someone else, say you will call them back and take a number. If they are on a deadline even ten minutes wait will not hurt!

Keep the statement on you!

Keep paper copies of this statement with you during the period that the situation is live just in case you are taken by surprise by a reporter phoning you when you are in the supermarket...it has happened! In a major crisis have updated statements available in a window at the front of the church and copies available in the church office/foyer.

Decide who will be the spokesperson

To make sure that messages/responses to the media are consistent decide who will be the spokesperson. Then inform the Deacons and church who this is so they can pass queries on.

Try not to say 'no comment'

This sounds defensive. It is better to simply say things like... 'I am sorry but I am not the best person to answer that question'. 'I am afraid I do not have any more facts available at the moment'. 'You will understand that this is a very difficult time for xxx at the moment'. Try to be helpful.

Inform the church and groups that meet on church premises

If you have loads of groups meeting outside Sunday Services make sure they know what to do. If a reporter turned up at Mums and Toddlers how would the group leader respond?

Church Notice Boards

If your church is busy and open in the week and you have an ongoing media crisis, remember that a reporter could take contact information from posters on your church notice board.

Mission Opportunities

Remember that there could be significant (appropriate) mission opportunities in a difficult situation. At a time of tragedy consider what few words of hope might bring comfort to the community. At a time of loss, what few words would you like the area/world to hear about that persons life?

Remember too that some reporters/broadcasters are also Christians! If they are not what will their contact with you/your church do to help them feel that our faith and behaviour - in relating to them - marks us out?

Create day to day relationships with local media

A key tip is to try and get to know the media when things are running smoothly. Offer stories and info regarding events to the local media outlets. Ask them to visit, what stories do they like to cover, would they like to attend a major event? Often when things then get rough they will know that normally your fellowship is a great place to be.