



The
**United
Reformed
Church**



**Crisis
Communications
Plan for Local
Churches**

Crisis Communications Plan for Local Churches

Introduction

Crisis communication is an essential element of disaster ministry. A little bit of preparation now can go a long way in ensuring everything goes more smoothly at your church when disaster strikes.

This plan aims to support Ministers, Elders and staff to provide best practice tips for dealing with local media, identify key appropriate contacts, and a strategy for agreeing media statements.

Table of contents

| | <i>Page</i> |
|--|-------------|
| Crisis communications | 3 |
| • Why do we need a crisis communications plan? | 3 |
| • Defining a crisis | 4 |
| • Examples of reputational harm crisis scenarios | 4 |
| • Examples of community/national/international tragedies | 5 |
| • Sharing good news | 5 |
| • Key contacts | 6 |
| • Immediate crisis response team | 6 |
| • Expanded crisis response team | 6 |
| Implementing the crisis communications plan | 7 |
| What to do if you: | |
| • Learn about a crisis featuring the church from the media | 8 |
| • Learn about a crisis featuring the church from other sources | 9 |
| • Dealing with matters of national importance | 10 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| • If the media want a local church response to a national crisis | 10 |
| Responding to a local community tragedy | 11 |
| • Get media support for your local church | 11 |
| • Open your church | 12 |
| Using social media in a crisis | 13 |
| • Examples of social media posts | 14 |
| • Handling the media on site | 17 |
| • Providing a media briefing | 18 |
| • Useful helpline numbers | 19 |

Crisis communications

Why do we need a Crisis Communications Plan?

In 2018, Theos Think Tank published its [*After Grenfell: the Faith Groups' Response*](#) report. The report shows that in the wake of a horrific tragedy, the role of faith groups in the community stands out. It reports how “churches, mosques, synagogues, and gurdwaras all stepped up to the plate, responding practically, emotionally and spiritually to a moment of pain and confusion”.

These faith groups acted as evacuation areas, received, sorted and distributed donations, offered accommodation, drew up lists of the missing, supported emergency services, patrolled the cordon, counselled and supported survivors, provided space for prayer and reflection, and hosted interfaith services of memorial and lament.

Faith groups were able to respond the way they did because they are trusted, embedded in to the communities they serve, are long-standing institutions, and committed.

The report explores the experience of these faith groups in dealing with such a tragedy and highlights three things, that faith groups need to be: **prepared, visible and flexible.**

Defining a crisis

Faith groups can feature both positively and negatively in the media.

A crisis is a large-scale community/national/international tragedy that churches would want to support the community in dealing with/responding to.



However, it is also any event that can cause reputational harm to the United Reformed Church (URC) which places its values on trial in the court of public opinion.

If an incident occurs that has the potential to generate negative media interest, this Crisis Communications Plan will ensure that staff are well supported, can follow media protocols, alert appropriate colleagues and agree a key message statement for media outlets to publish.

This plan is also a good practice guide as to how to respond to community tragedies using social media, your website, and how best to organise volunteers.

Examples of reputational harm crisis scenarios

- Staff issue – eg a staff member has accused their employer of bullying and reported the matter to the press

- Safeguarding issue – an allegation involving a URC member of staff/volunteer or staff/volunteer of an organisation using URC premises has been made
- Property/manse issue – a tenant has been issued an eviction notice and reported the matter to the press
- Community issue – a church is closing, and the local community group can no longer use the premises for its activities and reported the matter to the press. A staff member/volunteer of an organisation using church premises has been arrested and is due to appear in court.

Examples of community/national/international tragedies

- Grenfell
- Shoreham Airshow crash
- Kings Cross fire
- 7/7 bombings
- London Bridge terror attacks
- New Zealand terror attacks
- Sri Lanka terror attacks

In all circumstances, the URC Communications Team, based at Church House, should be included as a first port of call for advice, information and guidance. The details for contacting the team are in the table below. They are trained and ready to assist you in whichever way helps.

Sharing good news

If any church has positive news to share eg it is featuring positively in the local media, radio or TV, it is good practice to alert the URC Communications Team so it can share your good news across the URC's national website and/or social media networks.

Key contacts

Immediate Crisis Response Team

| Name | Job title | Office number |
|------|---|---------------|
| | Minister | |
| | Lay leader | |
| | Synod Moderator | |
| | Safeguarding coordinator <i>(safeguarding issues only)</i> | |
| | Synod Safeguarding Officer <i>(safeguarding issues only)</i> | |
| | URC Communications Officer | 0207 520 2715 |
| | URC Head of Communications | 0207 691 9865 |

Expanded Crisis Response Team (depending on crisis/community event)

| Name | Job title | Daytime number |
|------|--------------------------------|----------------|
| | Church Secretary/Minister's PA | |
| | Key Elder | |
| | Synod Property Officer | |
| | Synod Treasurer | |
| | URC General Secretary | |
| | General Assembly Moderators | |

(Update these details every six months)

Out of hours mobile

Email

07976 753950

ann-marie.abbasah@urc.org.uk

07976 753950

andy.jackson@urc.org.uk

Out of hours mobile

Email

Implementing the Crisis Communications Plan

Anyone may activate the Crisis Communications Plan when they become aware of an actual or potential crisis.

- Activate the Immediate Crisis Response Team (ICRT)
- ICRT to quickly determine the initial response

If the Church is at the centre of/or features in a story and you learn of the crisis from the media

1. Politely but firmly decline to answer the reporter's questions using this response:
"I want to ensure you are given accurate and up-to-date information and will find the best person for you to speak to. If you let me take your details, I'll do my best to get the information you need."

Record the following:

- The time and date of call
 - The reporter's name
 - The reporter's telephone number
 - The reporter's email address
 - The media outlet the reporter works for
 - Information the reporter is seeking
 - The topic of the story
 - The reporter's deadline
2. Contact the ICRT and provide the information outlined in point one above.
 3. The URC Communications Team may agree that you direct all press enquiries to it – this will give you a buffer zone to deal with what you need to internally while the Communications

Officer or Head of Communications manages all the reporters calling you.

4. The URC Communications Team will gather facts from key people who know information about the situation and draft a media statement that addresses the reporter's questions.
5. Once the media statement has been agreed by the Immediate Crisis Response Team, the URC Communications Officer will forward the statement to the reporter.
6. Determine what/if information needs to be released to others in the congregation.
7. If necessary, the URC Communications Team will edit the media statement so that it can be read out during a Sunday service (pulpit statement).
8. Monitor media coverage of the story or social media, news websites, local radio and share any press coverage with the Immediate Crisis Response Team.

If you learn of a crisis featuring the church from a source other than the media

1. Gather as much information as possible within 90 minutes of receiving the news and alert the ICRT
2. The URC Communications Team will gather any additional information needed and draft a pre-prepared media statement in anticipation that contact may be made by the media
3. Once the pre-prepared statement has been agreed by the ICRT, the URC Communications Team will share the finalised version with the ICRT
4. The statement will lay on file in the Communications' office and will only be sent out if requested by the media – in other words reactively not proactively.

Dealing with matters of national importance

On matters of national importance, it is likely that your church will want to provide some sort of reaction.

Examples of matters of national importance:

- The death of Her Majesty, the Queen
- The death of Prince Phillip, the Duke of Edinburgh
- The death of Diana, Princess of Wales

On such occasions, people may want to visit your church to pray or to light a candle.

In such events:

- See the “Open your church” section on Page 12 and follow the first three steps.
- Let people know that your church is open on social media
- Post a message of condolence or a prayer, and keep it up-to-date in regards to activities your church is undertaking in relation to the event.

If the media want a local church response to a national crisis/issue/event

1. Thank the reporter for the call. Ask if they want a quote, or a television or radio interview. Don't be afraid to take their details (below) so that you can call them back once you have gathered your thoughts and decided upon an answer.

Record the following:

- The time and date of call
- The reporter's name
- The reporter's telephone number

- The reporter's email address
- The media outlet the reporter works for
- Information the reporter is seeking
- The topic of the story
- The reporter's deadline

2. Contact the URC Communications Team (see page 6 for contact details) and seek advice and guidance.

Responding to a local community tragedy

In responding to a local community tragedy, this plan aims to help prepare local URCs in providing a visible and flexible presence to members of their communities.

If an unfortunate and unexpected tragedy, like the Grenfell fire, the Shoreham Airshow crash or the London Bridge terror attacks, happens in your area and your church is in the immediate vicinity to where the situation is occurring, your church could find itself in the middle of a large amount of media attention. You'll want as much support as possible, and may find the steps below useful:

Get media support for your local church

- Contact the Communications Officer or the Head of Communications in the URC Communications Team, update them about what's happening, seek advice or guidance, or ask if they could come down to your church.
- Contact your Synod Moderator and update them too.
- The Communications Team will update the General Secretary and General Assembly Moderators.

Open your church

- Open your church and make it available for people to pray
- Call members of your church and let them know what's happening so you have additional help on the ground
- Designate/assign roles to these people and wear labels/ name tags so they're easily identifiable, and to aid relationships and communication when lots of people may not know each other.

You'll need someone to:

1. Manage your church's **social media** accounts (or set accounts up if they haven't been already)
2. Ascertain the trending hashtag being used in relation to the situation in your area and use it in all posts to communicate news from the church.
3. Establish **safeguarding** procedures (e.g. decide if any children are allowed on site or not/or put up a sign saying children must be accompanied by an adult/create name tags with parent's contact details on)
4. Provide light **refreshments** to people using the church
5. **Log queries** and take messages
6. **Answer** queries
7. Handle and record every cash **donation** (who from, the amount)
8. Provide **admin support** to update the news section of your website, communicate with your social media person, and send a message of thanks to those who donated, let people know of special services
9. **Gather** contact details for:
 - local police
 - local authority's emergency out of hours number
 - local MP.

Using social media in a crisis

Social media is extremely valuable in a crisis. You can use platforms such as Twitter, Facebook or Instagram to communicate vital information, request the need for certain items, the need for volunteers, or to equally communicate things that are not wanted e.g. “please stay away from the area” etc.

1. Before a crisis happens, identify key people within your church who already have or can easily gain access to your social media accounts’ log-in details (username and password). It would be ideal for these people to be
 - a) a mix of decision-makers,
 - b) management to coordinate things,
 - c) those who can craft the right message, and
 - d) someone to monitor social media and local news outlets.
2. When the crisis strikes, inform your team.
3. If your church is in the immediate vicinity to a community tragedy ascertain if there is a hashtag being used e.g. #Grenfell, #Shoreham, #Londonbridge, and use them in your posts.
4. Identify the Twitter/Facebook handles of key services/agencies/local media and tag them in your post.
5. Publicly acknowledge what’s going on. You can reshare a news report and add a comment or create an organic post. In both circumstances, stick to the facts.

You could say something like this:

“@UnitedReformed understands there are reports of an incident in #newtown #ABCtowncentre. Our church in #XYZ is open for those who would like to pray. Light refreshments will also be provided visit www.localurc.org.uk for more details. @localcouncil @localpolice @localnewspaper”

The tweet below shows how St Clements Church in west London sought donations via Twitter.

People only have their pyjamas Need spare clothes, toys, toiletries - all ages:

St Clements Church
95 Sirdar Rd
W11 4EQ#GrenfellTower pic.twitter.com/DYRaQMSaF5

— Sophia Cannon (@SophiaCannon) June 14, 2017

This was then picked up by an LBC reporter, below, who was able to film and share how people responded outside St Clements itself.



Rachael Venables ✓
@rachaelvenables



Moving scenes outside St Clement's Church as people bring food, sanitary products and clothes for the homeless after the Grenfell fire @LBC



♥ 269 9:06 AM - Jun 14, 2017



💬 105 people are talking about this

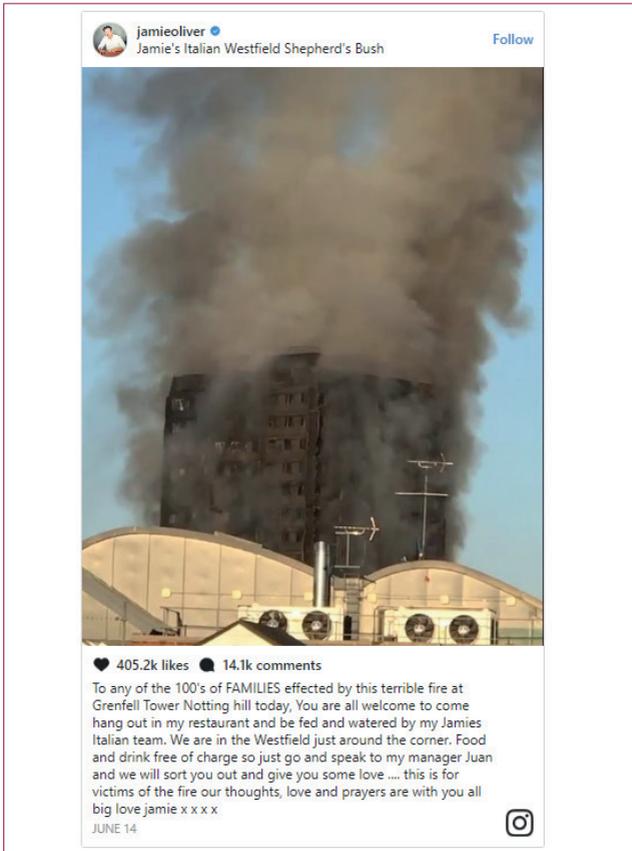


6. Including the social handles of local organisations means they can share your post too. Including hashtags, means your post will be grouped in all posts mentioning the same hashtag.

For example, these tweets below include hashtags and asks for volunteers and directs people to places where help is needed.



Although the Instagram message, below from the chef Jamie Oliver, does not include hashtags and does not tag any other organisations, it is a clear example of what help an organisation is offering and where it is directing people as to where they can receive support.



7. It is best to keep social media posts succinct. You can post a long form response on your website – an official place where people can find out more detailed information, and link to it in your social media post, as seen in point five above.

8. Monitor the social media accounts of your local council, police and news so that you can be kept updated, so you can adapt your social media and the support you are offering.

Handling the media on site

In the unfortunate event of a community tragedy, the media can show up at a church. Here's how to handle them.

- Identify a location where reporters and photographers can park vehicles and stand while covering their story. This will prevent them having “free run” of your church property but also acknowledges that they have a job to do
- Don't be afraid to create a “press free” zone by cordoning off an area and placing some hand-made signs. Journalists will respect this space (as it relates to privacy and harassment aka Clause 2 and Clause 3 of the [Independents Press Standards Organisation](#)). This would be better than throwing the media off your property, and enables you to create a relationship which may be beneficial to you in the future e.g. promoting a fundraising event to raise money for your church roof
- Designate a staff person to explain and enforce the boundaries
- Designate a staff person to log any queries posed by reporters. Make sure the following is logged:
 - The reporter's name
 - The reporter's telephone number
 - The media outlet the reporter works for
 - Information the reporter is seeking
 - The reporter's deadline.

Providing a media briefing

Alternatively, you could speak to the media directly or read out a statement (ideally prepared in conjunction with the URC Communications Team)

- Keep the statement short and simple
- Use confirmed facts only that includes the basics of what's happened and what the church is doing to respond. Do not give names of victims
- Express concern and compassion
- If reading a statement, don't forget to look up and make eye contact with reporters. If you didn't hear or don't understand a reporter's questions, ask them to repeat or clarify it
- You can pause before answering, or ask for a few moments so you can gather your thoughts
- Don't guess or speculate, it's okay to say "I don't know, I can check on that"
- Conclude the briefing by saying something like: "I know you may have more questions, but that's all I can say right now as I have to return to managing the situation and take care of the people involved." You can then take business cards and provide an update later on
- As you have assigned roles to people, you can ask your admin support to publish the statement on your website and social media.



Useful helpline numbers

Samaritans

Confidential support for people experiencing feelings of distress or despair.

Phone: 116 123 (free 24-hour helpline)

Website: www.samaritans.org

Cruse Bereavement UK

National charity for bereaved people in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Phone: 0808 808 1677 (Monday-Friday 9.30-5pm (excluding bank holidays), with extended hours on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings, when it's open until 8pm.)

Edinburgh Crisis Centre

Provides emotional support to callers

Phone: 0808 801 0414 / Text 07974 429075 (24 hrs)

Email: crisis@edinburghcrisiscentre.org.uk

Community Advice and Listening Line (C.A.L.L)

Offers a confidential listening and supportive service to the people of Wales

Freephone 0800 132 737

Or text help to 81066

This is one in a series of booklets designed to give information to those working and volunteering within the United Reformed Church.

The booklets can be read and downloaded at www.urc.org.uk/information-guides



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