Policies of the
Diocese of Kansas City ~ St. Joseph

Policy # 230.70

Guidelines for Communications
Management at a Time of Crisis

Approved By: Most Reverend Raymond J. Boland, DD

Approved: 1996

Effective: 1996

Reaffirmed By: Most Reverend Robert W. Finn, DD, June 1, 2007

Introduction
A crisis is any potentially life-altering event which causes people to experience unusually strong emotional reactions that push them beyond their normal coping abilities. It may be an accident involving a school child, a protest group arriving at the Chancery, or a public scandal involving a priest, religious or lay church employee.

Crises happen at inopportune times. Resulting news media coverage will say a lot about the management and accountability of our schools, parishes and diocese. At the same time, how we respond to such a crisis can demonstrate the competence, caring and compassion of our schools, parishes and diocese.

Crises usually cannot be controlled, but a prompt and thoughtful response can keep the problem from getting worse. The purpose is to help diocesan leadership and diocesan staff deal with crises with clarity and common sense. They are intended for distribution and use on the diocesan level.

I. Who Should Coordinate the Diocesan Crisis Response

A. The "Crisis Management Team"

1. The Crisis Management Team includes the Vicar General, Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Communication staff and any other senior diocesan staff persons affected. Although he should always be kept informed, the Bishop is part of the Crisis Management Team only in exceptional circumstances.

2. The diocesan lawyer should be included as part of the team in order to provide input on liability and regulatory issues related to a crisis. This is even more important if civil or criminal charges might be part of the crisis.

3. When appropriate, a representative of the local parish or school where the crisis is occurring might also be included in the team.

B. Activating the Team

1. With the Bishop's consent, the Vicar General (or in his absence the Chancellor or Vice-Chancellor) should convene the team.

2. Usually, the convener should be the media spokesperson.

3. With the assistance of other team members, the media spokesperson should gather pertinent information, and coordinate communication between the diocese and the parish / school where the crisis occurred. In addition, the responsibilities of the media spokesperson include scripting and coordinating the media response.

4. The convener should see to it that someone is in contact with the parish / school to assist on-site staff with information releases both to the press and to the parish / school community. On-site staff should be instructed to give out minimal but true basic information regarding the crisis and then refer additional inquiries to the media spokesperson. This basic information may be best scripted and approved by the media spokesperson.

5. The convener should also see to the distribution of appropriate information to the Chancery staff and to the ministering community of the diocese.

6. Where a proactive approach is taken to the media, the media spokesperson should oversee the compiling of names and contact information of media and church personnel needing immediate and ultimate notice of information regarding the crisis.

C. Plan for Arrangements and Prepare Information Materials

1. The following is a checklist to guide the team's work at the time of a crisis:

a. What area would best serve as a press room in the event a space is required for a press conference?

b. How is the best and most efficient way to handle the extra load of inquiries?

c. Who will be responsible for maintaining proper contact with the Bishop during the time of the crisis?

d. Who will be responsible for maintaining proper contact with on-site staff during the time of the crisis?

e. Who will prepare and continue to update a statement of all relevant information regarding the crisis, including appropriate names, titles, background information of principal players and detailed description of the total diocesan and local response?

f. Who will prepare the press handout, which may include "d" above as well as the history and ministry of the diocese and the parish / school or other affected entity?

g. Should it be determined to be necessary, who will make arrangements for security personnel to keep order and control access to the offices?

II. Responding to the Publicity Surrounding the Crisis

A. Initial Steps

1. Reaction time is important. Quick response has much to do with getting off to a good start in managing a crisis. The Crisis Team should be convened immediately and should be apprised of all pertinent information.

2. All Crisis Team members should maintain a record of activities which should be kept on file for one year following the crisis. Keep all notes, memos and news releases on file for five years following the crisis.

3. A list should be compiled that identifies the most important individuals / publics who are likely to be affected by the crisis. This list should include both diocesan (Chancery / Charities) staff, local parish / school staff (most importantly those who may be answering phone calls relative to the crisis), affected constituencies and other area pastors / pastoral administrators and staffs. A sequence of notification should be developed and followed.

4. If the crisis has occurred in a parish or school it is important to immediately assess the preparedness of local staff to answer inquiries and to instruct them regarding their response. Always the local response should include a referral to the Chancery for any official statement.

5. Where appropriate, the Catholic Charities Crisis Intervention Team would be called upon to meet with affected staff and other groups (or follow School Setting manual). Their availability should be made known to the wider community so that others wishing their services may know how to contact them.

B. Preparation of Official Statement about the Crisis

1. Carefully prepare the official statement setting forth the basic facts and the actions taken. Accurate but non-inflammatory phrases should be used.

2. Should the media call about a crisis before a statement has been prepared, an immediate response might be: "I want to be sure the facts are, indeed, factual. I will get the information together and call you back. What is your deadline?" In addition, if it is imminent (i.e. within the next hour or two), say, "I will do my best to get the facts together and call you with whatever I have before your deadline. No doubt, we will want to make an official statement and that may take a bit more time, but in any event, I will get back with you." It is imperative that the individual talking with the media keep his or her promise to the reporter.

3. The initial position statement should contain the following information: a) basic facts; b) an expression of concern for persons involved; and c) action taken.

C. Releasing Information

1. The goal of the diocese should be full and open release of relevant information as it becomes available and verifiable.

2. Interviews with one reporter at a time should be the primary means for releasing information.

3. Only in unusual circumstances should a news conference be used to release information or to make an otherwise important announcement.

4. News conferences are best suited for situations where new information is continually coming to light and where the media require updating. For guidelines regarding news conferences see Addendum A.

5. Where an open parish / school meeting is thought valuable much of the format outlined in Addendum A might be followed.

III. After the Crisis

A. Additional Actions

1. Expressions of gratitude and appreciation should be expressed even as the crisis winds down and as the crisis news is no longer reported in the media. Individuals should be thanked for their services through telephone calls, personal letters and / or by way of public acknowledgment.

2. If it is felt that the media did something that was questionable or harmful (i.e., report crisis inaccurately, attribute quotes to the wrong person, report false information), one course of action may be to ignore the situation. However, if it is felt that a response must be made to something in the media, the reporter who did the story should be contacted first, not his or her superior.

B. Evaluation and Improvement

1. After a crisis, it is important for the Crisis Management Team (along with the Bishop) and everyone who was involved in handling the situation to look back at both the actions planned and the actions taken. The process of evaluation should include a thorough examination of the question, "Now that this crisis is behind us, what did we learn that will help us improve the next time?" The following area should be considered when making this evaluation:

a. Media coverage should be reviewed, including what was released and what was actually printed and broadcast. These items should be collected from the newspapers and broadcast stations for evaluation.

b. Activity records of all team members should be reviewed.

c. All memos and communications to employees, administration, priests, local pastors and ministers, affected church members, the community at large, etc., should be retained for study.

d. Evaluation of how the Crisis Team functioned during the crisis should be made.

e. Given the reaction of people involved what would the Team do differently?

f. An evaluation of the initial prepared statement should be made to assess if something was overlooked and if media arrangements, staffing, telephone response, etc., were adequate.

g. Consideration of using different words in a future crisis should be made (i.e., is the word "accident" better or worse than the word "mishap?").

h. What follow-up steps need to be done and who should do them?

i. What if any support do members of the Crisis Team need?

ADDENDUM A -- The News Conference

1. Everyone who would have a legitimate news interest should be invited to the news conference, including those on the religion beat.

2. The news conference should be conducted in a place already selected in the Crisis Management Plan.

3. A time should be selected for the news conference the allows the media to meet their deadlines.

4. If relevant, maps, schematics, photos or other exhibits should be available at the news conference.

5. A guide often used, and to be kept in mind, when facing the media is to be "fast, factual, frank, fair and friendly."

6. A moderator should be appointed -- other than the spokesperson -- to open, direct and close the conference. The moderator's duties should include:

a. Opening the meeting with a welcome to the media.

b. Explaining the services available (i.e., where the telephones are located and that background information and a printed copy of the prepared statement will be available at the close of the session).

c. Announcing the events that will take place (i.e., "First, [name/title], spokesperson for the conference, will read a prepared statement [which will be available to you today]. After the statement, he / she will be glad to respond to your questions.").

d. After the prepared statement has been read, the moderator will step forward and say, "We will be glad to take your questions now. Please, before your question, identify yourself." (The spokesperson will then field questions, making sure that he or she calls on as many of the reporters as possible).

e. After a reasonable time for questions -- approximately 15 minutes -- the moderator can say, "Let's make time for a couple more questions." Following two more questions, the moderator will say, "Thank you very much for being here. One final reminder, the background information and prepared statement are available at the door." (It is best to have people at the door personally handing out the background information -- just to make sure that everyone gets a copy).