



**Whiteford | Taylor | Preston** <sup>LLP</sup>  
THE CHURCH ATTORNEY <sup>®</sup>

## Managing the Media – When a Crisis Befalls the Church

### In General:

- Crises are newsworthy. The more heinous and ugly, the more reportable the crisis will be.
- Reporters will be relentless in their pursuit of a story and will not let truth and the whole story stand in the way of getting a story published.
- News stories can badly damage the reputations of churches and individuals. Even when later proven false or publicly recanted, the initial damage done is rarely completely rectified.
- The media must be managed to the extent possible as early as possible in the event of a church crisis.



### Specifics:

- Get an attorney experienced in working with the media if the crisis involves criminal charges or a civil suit that could damage the reputation of the church or one of its agents (ministers, employees, leaders, volunteers).  
Identify one spokesperson for the church.
- Only allow this spokesperson to issue public statements.
- Work with the attorney to draft a press statement. Speaking publically about some information may cause additional risk of liability for defamation or breach of confidentiality and could cause additional legal issues.
- Instruct all staff, especially those who answer the phones, about what to say and not to say in response to questions about the crisis.
- If appropriate given the nature of the crisis, work with the attorney to develop a different public statement to be issued internally. Church members will likely demand to know the full story as their right. Privacy, confidentiality, employment law, and other legal considerations outweigh the right, if any, of the church members to information about the crisis.
- Inform the church's regional district and/or denomination as early as possible.
- If the church has a social media presence, refrain from any discussion or statements about the crisis on the church's sites. Issue the press statement on the church's social media site only with prior approval from the attorney.
- Remind all staff and volunteers to refrain from discussing the crisis on social media.
- Never be afraid to say "No comment" or "I am not at liberty to discuss that matter."

*This information is being provided to you by the attorneys in the Churches & Faith Based Organizations Group of Whiteford, Taylor & Preston LLP. Erika E. Cole, Esq. is a partner at Whiteford, Taylor & Preston LLP. This information above is general legal information; it is not legal advice pertaining to any specific legal matter. Laws vary based on jurisdiction. You are advised to contact an attorney licensed in the jurisdiction in which your church is situated to provide advice directed to your particular issue and circumstances.*