

# **Unitarian Universalist Church of Brunswick**

## **CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN**

5/9/25

### **Introduction**

A crisis can be considered anything that puts the church's values on trial in the court of public opinion or a serious incident which requires a rapid response and/or information sharing with the congregation/public. The following procedures are to be implemented when such an incident takes place.

Examples include situations involving:

- Church leaders, members or constituents participating in an event or ministry on church property; church leaders, members or constituents participating in a church-sponsored event or ministry at a site other than the church (examples: youth trip, seniors' outing)
- People impacted, directly or indirectly, by the crisis;
- Clergy, staff or lay leadership potentially facing criminal or civil charges;
- Criminal activity that involves the church property;
- Traumatic events affecting the church facility or congregation.

This plan will allow the clergy and lay leadership of UUCB to:

- Provide compassion, concern and care for the victims of the crisis and those impacted by the crisis;
- Provide means for meeting the needs of media covering the crisis;
- Provide and enhance a positive image of UUCB.

## **The Crisis Communications Team**

### **Permanent Members and Roles:**

#### **Minister**

- Manages and directs the Crisis Communications Team
- Serves as the spokesperson to respond to all media queries during the crisis
- Links to and directs the work of other support staff (employed or volunteers during the crisis)

Lay Leader (may depend on the specific situation) Examples: Board Chair, member of the Executive Committee or another lay leader who is recognized and respected.

- Provides key link between the minister and the congregation
- Assists in gathering information about the crisis and background of the incident
- May be the Designated Spokesperson in the event the minister is unable or unavailable to fill the role
- Makes assignments for monitoring media coverage (clipping newspaper articles, recording or logging access to radio and television newscasts, and online coverage)

#### **Church Office Administrator**

- Monitors the logging of all telephone calls and other contacts from media during the crisis
- Duplicates previously prepared Fact Sheet on the church for distribution to the media

## Expanded Team (depending on the nature of the crisis):

- Additional Church Leadership (examples: Communications Committee Chair, Director of Lifelong Spiritual Formation, Committee on Ministry Chair, Finance Committee Chair, Youth Group Leader)
- Attorney (to provide information concerning the legal process; to advise, but not to determine, what spokesperson will say)
- UUA Consultant (to provide guidance in the development of statements to the media and preparation for interviews)
- Others, as appropriate

## Implementing the Crisis Communications Plan

Anyone may activate the Crisis Communications Plan when they become aware of an actual or potential crisis. The Crisis Communications Team can be activated by contacting any member of the Team. Any member of the Team is responsible for activating the Permanent Team when they learn of an actual or pending crisis. The Permanent Team will determine the initial response, which will depend in part on how the information is initially received.

### If learning of the crisis from the media:

1. Person receiving the call politely but firmly declines to answer the reporter's questions and
  - a. Takes a message including:
    - Reporter's name
    - Reporter's telephone number (and permission to use for text, if applicable)
    - Reporter's email address
    - Media outlet
    - Reporter's deadline
    - Information the reporter is seeking (also note what information the reporter already has—factual as well as unsubstantiated information)
    - Time and date of the call
  - b. Immediately notifies the Minister or other member of the Crisis Communications Team and conveys all of the information gathered from the reporter.
2. If the person receiving the reporter's inquiry is unable to arrange for someone to respond to the reporter before their deadline, they should call the reporter and let them know that someone who can respond to the reporter's questions will return the call. DO NOT RESPOND to the questions; defer to the Minister or Designated Spokesperson.
3. Minister or designee notifies UUA of crisis and provides available information.
4. **The-First-90-Minutes Meeting:** Minister or another designated member of the Crisis Communications Team initiates an immediate face-to-face, video or telephone meeting following the agenda for The-First-90-Minutes Meeting (see below).
5. Minister or Designated Spokesperson returns calls from media, as far in advance of deadline as possible, either to provide the factual information requested or to learn what specific information is needed.
6. Simultaneously with Step 5, the Minister or Lay Leader alerts other key leaders in the church and/or community to the crisis.
7. The Lay Leader makes assignments for monitoring media coverage of the crisis.
8. The Crisis Communications Team meets as needed to strategize the continuing response.

9. When the crisis is over, the Crisis Communications Team meets to evaluate management procedures and strategy and to make revisions.

### **If learning of the crisis from a source other than the media:**

1. The person learning of the crisis informs the Minister, Lay Leader or another Team member, with all information about the crisis.
2. Team member learning of the crisis gathers the Crisis Communications Team in person, by telephone or online video call. The Minister or designee makes assignments for fact-gathering and sets up a First-90-Minutes Meeting.
3. Minister or designee notifies the UUA of the crisis or pending crisis and provides known information.
4. Following the agenda for **The-First-90-Minutes Meeting**, the Crisis Communications Team meets to assess the facts of the crisis and the first response. The Team determines if the church should be proactive in releasing a statement about the crisis to the media.
5. The Minister or designee responds to media contacts as received.
6. When the crisis is over, the Crisis Communications Team meets to evaluate response procedures and strategy and to make revisions to the plan.

### **The-First-90-Minutes Meeting**

The First 90 Minutes are critical in managing communications tasks when a crisis occurs or is pending. When one learns of a crisis through a contact with a reporter—not an unusual occurrence—there are approximately 90 minutes to make the first formal response. If one learns of the crisis from another source, the church can anticipate a call within the next 90 minutes, although it may be sooner, or hours or days later.

This is the agenda for the first meeting of the permanent or expanded Crisis Communications Team. This meeting may be face-to-face, by telephone, by video call, or a combination.

1. Review of the Church Mission Statement and Covenant.
2. Statement to the group as to what has happened or will happen.
3. Identification of:
  - a. People impacted, directly or indirectly, by the crisis
  - b. Confirmed facts
  - c. Unconfirmed information
  - d. Other needed information
  - e. Who else needs to be a part of the Expanded Crisis Communications Team
  - f. Who else in the congregation needs to be informed immediately
  - g. Who in the community needs to be informed immediately
4. Assign task of gathering information to confirm or discount unconfirmed information and other needed information. If possible, have someone other than one of the Crisis Communications Team members do this, so the information can be gathered while the meeting proceeds.
5. Determine what information needs to be released immediately to others in the congregation and community and assign the Minister or Designated Spokesperson to begin doing this.
6. Determine if sufficient interest potentially exists to require a “staging area” for news media at the church or site of the crisis.
7. Determine what information can and will be released in the first response to news media calls, keeping in mind the importance of confidentiality.

8. Develop the statement the Minister or designated spokesperson will use in response to the initial contacts from the media. This may be a formal or informal statement. The key is that the same basic information is given to all media contacts in the initial conversation.
9. Determine what, if any, information beyond the statement can be released to the news media at this time.
10. Identify questions reporters are likely to ask and consider possible responses. (If possible, have the UUA resource person assist—in person or by telephone—in identifying the Team’s media response.)
11. Determine what questions must be referred to other sources (for example, questions such as “Was the driver of the van involved in the accident speeding?” or “Did the person accused of starting the fire have a criminal record?” should be referred to law enforcement, fire or public safety officials.)
12. Determine what response the Minister or Designated Spokesperson will give to questions that cannot be answered at that time either because information is not available or because the information cannot be released.
13. Review assignments and roles as the management of communications surrounding the crisis begins.
14. Set the next meeting of the Crisis Communications Team.