
GROWTH POINTS

With Gary L. McIntosh, D.Min., Ph.D.

Prepare for the Worst

If a catastrophe hit your church tomorrow, would you be prepared for it?

Perhaps it is a newspaper article about a child being molested at your church, a fire that destroys the auditorium, an elder who commits suicide, an employee that embezzles a significant amount of money, or a virus that keeps you from meeting?

These are just a few of the occurrences that have, and will, hit churches. If a sudden tragedy were to strike your church, what would you do? Would you know what to tell the community, the church participants, or the press?

Now, I'm not suggesting that you have to know ahead of time how to deal with everything. Nevertheless, enough pastors have asked, "Why weren't we prepared for this?" It'll serve you and your church leaders well to have in readiness a thoughtful procedure for handling disasters.

As former president Teddy Roosevelt once remarked, "You never have trouble if you are prepared for it." That statement may be overstated, but the basic idea is right—be prepared.

One reason to prepare for the worst is that when a crisis occurs, people will want to know what happened and why. They desire to know what will happen as a result, and what you and other leaders are going to do about it. Furthermore, they want to know it now. It's best to be somewhat prepared.

As all eyes are focused on you for direction; You must be ready to tell your story honestly to squash rumors and lower panic. In most situations, you won't have days or hours to take care of everything that needs to be done. Having a preplanned communication plan in place will buy you time and rout confusion.

What preparations should be included in your plan? While specific actions and statements must be tailored to the particular situation, the following are some basics.

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First, designate specific individuals to speak.

Carefully select persons to talk to your publics who are emotionally controlled, measured in words and tone of voice, who are articulate, while able to bring calm.

Second, determine who will write any published information.

Look for those who are excellent writers, able to communicate clarity in written words.

Third, outline a procedure for investigating all claims of wrongdoing.

For example, what are the procedures for investigating an accusation of theft, child abuse, inappropriate touching, or the death of a key leader, as examples?

Fourth, designate specific people to key tasks like contacting legal counsel, insurance agents, proper authorities, and persons involved.

Fifth, communicate to ALL of your publics.

Be sure to include how your church would communicate to every one of your constituents. Think through what might be the major question each public would ask in an

emergency. Then prepare a general statement that might be made in such an occurrence.

Being prepared for the worst includes having a plan for how to say, "I'm sorry." Mistakes will be made in any church, and it behooves you to be prepared on how to make a strong apology. A successful apology demonstrates responsibility and acknowledgement of a problem. Most pastors and other church leaders do them wrong. The best research suggests there are six components to a good apology that you should keep in mind. First is an expression of regret. Second is an explanation of what went wrong. Third is an acknowledgement of responsibility. Fourth is a declaration of repentance. Fifth is an offer of repair. Last is a request for forgiveness.

Communication to all the church's various publics during a crisis is the glue that holds all of your actions together. Every person in each public needs to know what's taking place in your ministry, what others are doing, and what's being accomplished, so they are able to inform others in the church's wide network of influence.

Being prepared to handle a worst-case crisis is critical today, and will increasingly be important as various communication channels increase in the years ahead.

Are you prepared for the worst? Do you have a simple plan in place?

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