

## **Tips for Effective Use of the Media**

In the event of a disaster or tragedy, ministers may be called upon to comment, make statements, offer hope, and occasionally speak on behalf of congregants. Media interviews can offer the opportunity for a healing experience and may help advocate for a cause. The following tips can help prepare pastors, lay leaders, and congregants for the interview process.

### **Have a Plan:**

Churches should consider developing a media plan to follow in the event of an emergency. This plan can include steps for managing incoming requests for coverage; outgoing requests for coverage; and the use of social media to disseminate information. The plan can be reviewed and rehearsed as needed. While the minister is often the spokesperson, it's helpful to have one or two other alternate spokespeople. In a time of crisis, put the media plan into action. It's best if you tell your story, rather than having others tell it for you.

### **Speaking to Reporters:**

**With media interviews, time is often of the essence.** Reporters will seek other sources if you don't get back in a timely manner (meaning minutes, not hours or days later). Be polite and helpful. You can always ask what the angle is and decline if it's not appropriate for you to act as a spokesperson.

If you get a request for the interview and it makes sense to do it, say yes immediately. If you feel that you'd like a few minutes to consider what you'll say, you can tell the reporter "now isn't a great time" and ask, "may I call you back in 10 or 15 minutes?" This will give you the luxury of gathering your thoughts and assembling some key points.

In the case of breaking news, a reporter may speak to a spokesperson for five minutes. In the case of a follow-up feature story, it could be 30-40 minutes.

**Consider the impact upon your constituents.** Describe what you (or your congregants) are going through. Are there physical or emotional struggles? What's been the hardest? Are there long-term implications? Very specifically, how can the public help?

**Determine your message and stay on point.** Write down your three main points and stick to the message. When appropriate, talk about what you're doing in response to the disaster and let people know how they can help. If you're asking for donations, be very specific about the needs and drop-off points. Give people a website or place to get more information. (Phone numbers are fine for print, but difficult to remember in other mediums.)

**When possible, speak in sound bites** (also called 'actualities'). These are brief, interesting, fully contained thoughts. The sound bite is the audio version of a catchy print headline...and it's typically no longer than ten seconds. Is your take-away message hopeful and/or compelling? Realize that the media will often isolate sound bites, so it's important to be succinct.

It sounds stilted to have someone read from a statement. When possible, speak from the heart. When appropriate, use enough information to support your point. Make a point, give an example, and offer an action step. Be an honest, warm, logical non-anxious presence. Offer hope.

**When you can, paint pictures to make it real.** Use stories and analogies to aid in the description. For example, instead of saying '47,000 square feet', you can say, 'the size of a football field'.

When appropriate, use words that highlight your message: “the key point is”, “the bottom line is”, “the focus is”, “the objective is”, “let me emphasize that”, etc...  
At the end of the interview, summarize your main points.

In the case of a spontaneous interview, ask why the reporter is requesting the interview so that you understand the angle. It's appropriate to ask that cameras, lights and recording equipment be kept at a reasonable distance. Stick to the subject. While you may be asked to do an interview live on the radio, it's unlikely that you'll be asked to do a television interview that is broadcast live, so if you stumble through an answer on camera, ask if you can redo it.

You may want to give some background information in order to help the reporter understand the issue. You can also put together a 1-sheet with some important points, a quote, specific ways to help, and contact information.

If you're speaking to a group of reporters or if you are among a group of speakers, identify yourself by name before and after you speak. If you come up to speak for a second time, identify yourself again. Reporters will need the correct spelling of your name. (Business cards are helpful.)

It may be appropriate for you to furnish the media with pictures (of the site or the person, in the case of one deceased). If you give the reporter a nice photo, they'll take a picture of it (and you keep the photo) and use that for “B roll”. It's possible that they'll run more of the touching photos that you've provided and less footage of the shocking scene.

Sometimes there will be a “pool reporter” covering a story. That pool reporter then makes that feed available to all of their affiliates.

### Interview Tips:

**In any interview, put your phone on silent mode** so that your pocket doesn't start ringing while you're doing an interview.

Often, a reporter will speak to you for a couple of minutes before beginning filming in order to set you at ease. This is not always the case. In either case, it's important to realize that there is no such thing as “off the record” and that anything you say may be used in the story. Camera crews may be filming, even from blocks away.

**For a TV interview**, the reporter may use a hand-held microphone or offer to let you use a (clip-on) lavalier mic. For a TV interview, look at the reporter, not at the camera. For a **Skype/web interview**, look at the web camera. If you're doing **a radio interview** and you are on the phone, make sure your call-waiting is disabled for the duration of the call and if you're near a radio that it is off or turned way down to avoid 'feedback'.

Avoid milk, yogurt, or chocolate right before an interview as dairy products may lead to mucous formation and will tend to 'coat' your throat.

Don't appear disorganized or unprepared. Be grounded—don't shift from one foot to the other. Avoid

putting your hands in your pockets...you may look as though you're hiding something and there's always the temptation to jingle any change in the pockets.

**When giving an interview, use everyday language that a layman will understand.** Don't talk over people's heads. Be brief and to the point. Make your point early (and often)! Correct any misconceptions or inconsistencies. Be yourself. Stay calm, even if you're provoked.

Before beginning the interview, tell the reporter how much time you have available and review the subject matter you agreed to discuss. Also, if the situation requires it, give the reporter some brief background on the subject matter.

### Handling Questions:

**Your best strategy is to consider the questions you may be asked, before you're asked!**

If someone tries to ambush you with a negative set-up, never repeat the negative part of the question, even if you bookend it with “no, it's not true that...” or “I've heard it said that...but it's untrue”. The media can edit your comment. Rather than put the focus on what you can't say, focus on your message.

Be cognizant of leading questions. For example, “It's exciting that...” Unless you and the organization are in 100% agreement, you may want to ignore that and just move forward with your message.

Especially when speaking on behalf of families touched by tragedy, if you're asked a question that you would prefer not to answer, it's completely appropriate to say, “I can't share that information with you right now” or “I'm not able to verify that” or “I can't comment on that out of respect for the family”. If the reporter re-frames and asks the question again, you can say, “I can't answer that because... (to protect someone's privacy or for legal reasons, etc...)” or “again, on behalf of the family, I'd prefer not to answer that, let's please move on...”

Try not to simply say “no comment” as that can be perceived as a sign of one who is uncaring or hiding something. Try not to give 'yes' or 'no' answers.

It goes without saying, but it's important enough to state anyway: be honest in your responses. You can be honest without giving all of the information!

If you don't understand the question, clarify what is being asked.

If you are asked a question that isn't relevant to the point you wish to make, bridge to what you do want to say. (“we've also found that...” or “just as important is...”, etc...)

If you don't know the answer, be honest. Tell the person you'll get back to them or offer a resource for finding the information.

**If you're asked if you'd like to add anything, add any key point that hasn't been discussed or reiterate your key points.** “One critical thing to remember is...” or “The one key point I'd like people to bear in mind is...”

You can lead the reporter to ask questions for which you've already got prepared answers. Some ways to do this include, “You'd be surprised at the condition of...”, “In this process, we've learned a few

incredibly interesting things...” or “Very few people outside of this community know that...”

Be aware that some reporters will ask difficult questions some time after the subject was initially discussed, or at a time when you think the interview is over...and they may ask in a casual manner. Remember there is no such thing as 'off the record' and while you are speaking with a reporter, anything you say may be used in the interview or the story.

#### Speaking at a News Conference:

**If you're giving a news conference, whether or not you have notes, try to have your opening and closing statements memorized.** This will give you the ability to make good eye contact and start and finish on strong notes.

You may take the opportunity at the outset to ask reporters or audience members to hold questions until you have finished the presentation. Pause for a couple of seconds after you've set the ground rules before you begin the presentation (that way there's a place to make a clean edit). Use heartfelt gestures during the presentation, but make sure they are appropriate to the situation.

Be careful not to grip the lectern as though you're holding on for dear life.

During any question and answer period, begin addressing your response to the person who asked the question, but also make eye contact with others in the room.

**Make sure your notes are in a font large enough to read without your glasses.** Double or triple space your lines. It's preferable that you're working off of notes, rather than fully composed sentences. Whatever you have prepared, make sure that you can glance down and see your thoughts clearly separated by white space.

Don't staple pages; keep them loose and number them.

#### On-Site Media Attention:

In general, the media is very respectful of the sanctity of the church. From time to time, you may need to ask that they give you your space. On those occasions when there is a sensational story and they want to cover officiated activities, they may need to be asked to observe from a distance. Usually this can be facilitated through leadership positioned at the door(s) of the church. Public streets are fair game for reporters and they will not go a block away on their own. Digital cameras can capture excellent images from a great distance so be aware that just because you can't see them closely doesn't mean that they can't see you.

The situation may determine the interview location, but you may also determine the location of the interview. Do you want to be outside, surrounded by onlookers? Does it make sense to have the interview take place inside the church or in someone's living room, rather than on the street?

#### Handling Nerves:

A simple relaxation technique follows: Breathe deeply. Inhale to the count of three and exhale to the same count. Continue inhaling and exhaling, adding a number to the count each time until you feel deeply relaxed. By “10”, you may not even remember you were initially nervous!

Vigorous shaking of the hands releases nervous energy.

Slow head, neck and shoulder rolls release tension there.

### Dress for the Event:

**Dress appropriately for the event.** If you're mopping up after a flood, jeans are more appropriate than your Sunday best.

Avoid wearing white on-camera. Avoid narrow stripes...they tend to zag or flutter on camera. Avoid flashy jewelry or bold patterns. Blue and grey are good colors for television.

### Media Lingo:

“B roll”: Video and pictures that are broadcast while the reporter tells the story in the voice over.

“Live shot or stand-up”: A live broadcast from the reporter on scene. The anchor will often throw it to the reporter who will give the intro to a taped piece, The reporter will then come back to the scene for the outro and send it back to the anchor person.

“Photographer”: In print, this is a photographer. In TV, this is the camera-person.

“Stand by”: This means 'be quiet' as the camera and mic are live and whatever you say could be broadcast on the air.

### Tracking Coverage:

It's a good idea to track coverage, if you can. Ask the reporter for a business card and when the story will air or be published. You can often put a link to the story on your website.

### Obtaining Media Coverage:

It's always a good idea to build relationships with the media before any type of disaster strikes. Since time is of the essence in the media, reporters will often call their go-to people first. It may help to reach out with a phone call or an email to make yourself known to media.

In some cases, the reporter may call or knock on your door and in other cases, the church may call or email the media. Reporters often hear of breaking news on their scanners or through social media (facebook, twitter, etc...).

### Coverage After the Crisis:

**Consider the angles for continuing coverage, whether immediate or some time after the event.** For example, “Mother appeals to public for help”, “Boy is improving”, “Boy released from hospital”, “It's been a year since”, etc... If there is a charity fund established or a memorial park has been dedicated, those would be appropriate causes for coverage.

### Understanding the Media:

**The media reports 24 hours a day, everyday.** They look for things that will keep people tuning in or logging on to see, hear, and read the story.

Most mainstream media, when covering a disaster, are interested in the human interest aspect of the story. Remember that you're appealing to the broad masses so use language that everyone can understand. Show ways that the community can come together.

In most disaster situations, it will be very appropriate for you to talk about your church as a unique part of a community effort; to offer hope; and to share ways that the viewers, listeners, or readers can help.

Submitted by Estelle Margarones to the MACUCC Disaster Resource Team

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