
Crisis Communication for Churches – COVID-19

This document is intended to give you suggestions and considerations for communication during the current coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

People may react with curiosity, concern, fear, or even anger in the midst of uncertainty. We encourage you to handle any crisis with honesty, authenticity, compassion, integrity, patience, and speed to enable your church to deal with a changing and fluid situation and also return to a state of normalcy as quickly as possible.

Additional resources can be found on pacificdistrict.ca/covid-19-church and information will be updated here as it is available.

Communication to Your Church Family

Communication in any crisis is essential – both internally to staff and leaders, and externally to your church congregation and community. As the COVID-19 crisis may take weeks or months before we see a return to normal social customs and gatherings, ongoing communication will be important.

To deal with the ongoing crisis, consider forming a crisis management team that meets regularly, preferably virtually. If meeting in person, ensure that the team is following directives from public health officials regarding safe practices and social distancing. The team should be comprised of the Lead Pastor, the Board Chair, and other key staff members or leaders.

The team should:

- Take time to pray
- Understand the impact of COVID-19 on the church, its ministry, the congregation, and your community by gathering facts from reliable, factual sources
- Determine plans for church services and ministry programs, following BC government and public health directives
- Determine action steps for church leaders, staff, finances, and facilities
- Seek missional opportunities to lift Jesus up and serve people in His name
- Communicate plans and action steps you're taking

When communicating plans and action steps, consider including the following:

- practical steps people can take to prevent the spread of infection
- practical steps that your church is taking to ensure the well-being of your church family and community
- information on how to connect with the church for services and pastoral care when large gatherings are not possible
- encouragement to look for and participate in missional opportunities
- reassurance in the midst of crisis

Consider how you communicate:

- **Tone** – What tone is appropriate for your communication? When you communicate in a crisis, be clear, honest, compassionate, and calm.
- **Information** – What information do you need people to know? What do you want people to know?
- **Frequency** – How often is it appropriate to communicate? Strike a balance between over-communicating, which may increase fear, or under-communicating, which may cause confusion.
- **Audience** – Be aware of who your audience is and be intentional with where you communicate. Your audience may include the general public if you post on social media or a public website.
- **Privacy** – Remember when communicating any news or prayer requests of sick congregants to respect the privacy of those who are ill. Do not share publicly the names of anyone who is ill or self-isolating without their permission.

Communication to the Media

As the COVID-19 crisis continues, the news will likely continue to be filled with statistics, medical recommendations, and government announcements. Churches may also be faced with answering media questions about affected or ill congregants or the church is handling this crisis. Preparing answers to potential media questions in advance, without the pressure of a reporter on the phone or at your doorstep, is a wise thing to do. Some of these same questions may also come from church staff, leaders, congregants, or people in your community.

Please contact the District Office if you receive any media request, preferably prior to responding.

Here are a few potential questions to anticipate:

- What has your church done to comply with the government recommendations and directives?
- If your church has had to cancel services and programs, what contingency plans are in place?
- What are you hearing from your church family? Do you have sick congregants?
- What are you doing to help your employees?
- How is 'working from home' working out for your organization/church?
- Are employees still working or have they been laid off? Are they being paid even if they are not working?
- What are you doing to assist your church congregants?

This is not an exhaustive list, and we suggest that you anticipate other questions, especially if the COVID-19 situation changes.

When responding to the media, be sure to:

- **Pray** – Seek wisdom and ask for peace.
- **Seek Help** – Contact the District Office to notify us of the media request before you respond. We are here to help you!
- **Prepare** – Write a media release statement in advance of speaking to the media and consider key media talking points for when you communicate.
- **Choose a Speaker** – Have only one appointed spokesperson address the media with the carefully prepared statement.
- **Be Clear** – When responding, be clear, measured, and authentic, with a tone that is suited to the nature and severity of the situation.

The District Office is here to support you as you communicate and you can reach our office at 604-372-1922 or cpdoffice@pacificdistrict.ca.