

# Is your church ready to handle a crisis?

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The question is not what to do if a crisis strikes, it is being prepared when your church faces a crisis, said Chris Turner, director of communications for the Tennessee Baptist Mission Board.

“There are two types of organizations – those that have had a crisis and those whose crisis hasn’t hit yet,” Turner said.

Turner was featured recently on the “Tennessee Golden Hour,” a podcast produced by the Tennessee Baptist Mission Board and hosted by TBMB staff members.

Turner noted there are two types of crises – those that are sudden and those that are smoldering. A sudden crisis is one that is totally unexpected such as a tornado destroying the church building, he said.

A smoldering crisis is one that possibly could have been avoided, such as an elderly church member tripping over a crack in the sidewalk that has been there for the last decade and falling and breaking a hip.

“That is a smoldering crisis because we should have fixed the crack in the sidewalk,” he said.

## **Preparation**

The key to dealing with a crisis is to be prepared, he stressed. The first step is to have a staff meeting that just talks about what the church would do if a crisis hits, who needs to be involved and assign responsibilities to those who would manage the crisis.

The first 15 minutes after a crisis happens is critical, Turner said. He used an example of a bus wreck involving kids from the church who were returning from a mission trip. "In today's social media environment, someone might actually be livestreaming the event. As soon as church leaders are notified of the accident there is not time to fumble around and ask, 'What are we going to do?'"

"Immediate action is critical in managing a crisis well and managing a crisis well is completely dependent upon a constant flow of accurate information," he said.

Another key in managing a crisis well is to make sure the message communicated is consistent whether it is to the church members or the community at large. "There may be things that you share internally but not externally, but it's not different information, he said.

A crisis normally involves three primary audiences – those in the church, those in the community, and everyone else, Turner observed.

Regardless of the audience, church leaders need to "communicate accurate and truthful information," he added.

Church members are the first audience when a crisis occurs, especially if it is an incident that happened in the church such as embezzlement of funds or accusations of sexual abuse that have been made public, he said.

The community at large also needs to be informed, he continued. "How a crisis is managed can completely and totally impact a community's perception of that church.

"If the church manages that crisis well, it gives a level of confidence to the community that the church cares, they're on it (the crisis), they're responding, and they are responding quickly."

Turner said it is important that the church communicates that it is responding promptly to a crisis. If the church does not handle the crisis well, it “loses effectiveness in that community. If that happens, the church has lost its reason for being in a large degree because the community is its first mission field,” he added.

### **Seizing the opportunity**

While crises can be devastating and stressful to a church, there are also benefits if they are managed well, Turner noted.

“If the pastor and leadership in the church lead well during a crisis, members will recognize that they are ministering to us and protecting us,” he said. In addition, the community gains a greater confidence in the church when a crisis is managed well, he added.

“Crises are always an opportunity to solidify leadership and strengthen an organization and to show the strength of who a church is and how they ministered to other people.”