

In crisis, churches unprepared for dealing with media

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By Angela Best

Communication Intern

Dealing with difficult situations can be trying enough for a church. Handling pressure from media can make it even harder.

As First Baptist Church in Forney has focused on getting 10 members of a church mission team trapped in Lebanon back home, the congregation also has been faced with voluminous media requests from television stations, newspapers and national news networks.

Ben Dudley, community pastor at University Baptist Church in Waco, said the volume of the media interest can come as a surprise. The church experienced a media blitz last fall, when its pastor, Kyle Lake, was electrocuted during a baptism.

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“It was unexpected and overwhelming at first,” he said. “But once we realized that the media wasn’t going to just go away, we had to decide how to deal with them.”

Many churches find themselves unprepared for handling media during a crisis, so they decide to seek help. The Baptist General Convention of Texas can provide media assistance to churches dealing with the media during a crisis.

“We appointed a spokesperson for the church—a media liaison,” Dudley said. “That way, everything that was communicated came from one person, and that person knew all the details and latest information, so we were not sending mixed messages.”

Appointing one spokesperson also helps both the church and the media, since the media know exactly who to contact for information, he explained.

University Baptist Church also held a press conference to avoid multiple time-consuming interviews. Press releases proved useful, and each was posted on the church’s web site for easy viewing.

When dealing with the press, churches should anticipate questions reporters might ask, like “How many people are affected?” or “What services are you providing?” said Ferrell Foster, director of the BGCT communications team.

It is important to get the reporter’s name, media outlet name and phone number in case a spokesperson has to call back with additional or corrected information, Foster added.

Asking about the reporter’s deadline also is key, because usually it is within the same day of contact, Foster said. If the church doesn’t respond quickly, the media will go elsewhere for information.

Churches should provide telephone numbers of spokespersons whom reporters can contact to obtain more information, Dudley noted.

“The media has a job to do, and they will find a way to do it,” he said. “So, it is better to work alongside them so that the correct information goes to the public.”

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