

When the unexpected happens: Preparing yourself for media attention

June 20, 2018

What will you do when something unexpected happens that turns the eyes of the world on you and your ministry? What will you do when reporters call, knock on your door or show up with cameras?

Ellen Di Giosia and Jay Pritchard provided answers to these questions during their workshop at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship 2018 General Assembly in Dallas.

Di Giosia served Texas Baptist churches in Valley Mills, San Marcos and San Antonio before being called in 2017 as pastor of First Baptist Church in Jefferson City, Tennessee. Not long after becoming pastor at First Baptist in Jefferson City, Di Giosia and her church became the subject of a media storm related to the position of the Tennessee Baptist Convention on women in ministry resulting in the church's expulsion from the state convention.

Jay Pritchard is a member of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, co-founder of Upward Strategy Group and specialist in crisis communications. In 2014, Wilshire found itself at the epicenter of an Ebola crisis in Dallas when Louise Troh, fiancée of Thomas Eric Duncan, was revealed to be a member of Wilshire. Duncan contracted Ebola prior to his arrival in Dallas and died days later.

The story made national and international headlines, taking Wilshire along with it. Pritchard played an instrumental role in consulting Wilshire staff on how to prepare for and interact with the media. As a result, Wilshire

skillfully navigated a potentially overwhelming crisis situation.

Churches, their ministers and members can unwittingly find themselves at the center of similar situations. For example, First Baptist Church of West, in Central Texas, received considerable media attention during the immediate aftermath of a fertilizer plant explosion there in 2013. First Baptist Church of Sutherland Springs also received international attention after the mass shooting there in 2017.

Are you prepared for a crisis event?

Crisis communications for organizations and their leaders

As an expert in crisis communications, Pritchard provided the following advice to prepare for and respond to the media.

1. Get ahead. Establish a crisis response team before a crisis or emergency arises. Do so when things are calm and you have time to create an effective team. Determine who will be the point person for all inquiries and public communication. Designate a specific area where media will be allowed. Send all media to your designated area where they will be addressed by your point person. Establish concentric circles of concern (to borrow Oscar Thompson's title for his book on evangelism), or a prioritized list of people and entities you will contact immediately following and throughout an incident. Determine who needs to be contacted first and move outward from there.

2. Give the team the opportunity to rehearse a crisis situation.

When a crisis or emergency happens:

1. Begin by breathing. Literally take a breath. Take as many deep and

deliberate breaths as you need before doing anything else. The brain needs the oxygen as well as the buffer of time.

2. Follow your plan.

3. Start by talking through what is happening and establish the message you want to communicate to each circle of concern, including the media. What do you want each circle to know about you, your organization and what is happening?

4. Communicate only what you know. Tell the truth and only the truth. Do not speculate.

5. Stick to your message. Don't let the media or anyone else get you "off message."

Crisis self-care for ministers

As a minister who experienced the chaos of a media frenzy, Di Giosia provided the following pointers for self-care.

1. Know when to talk and when not to talk. Media training will help set these boundaries.

2. Practice being the non-anxious presence during less stressful situations. Leaders are expected to be calm and cool under pressure.

3. Have an 'internal crew' of people within the congregation with whom you can debrief.

4. Have an 'external crew' of peers, colleagues and friends outside the congregation who can support you in ways your congregation cannot.

5. Know your limits. You are not a superhero and need to say 'no' to the media more than you say 'yes.' You do not have to accept every request for

an interview.

6. Be honest about the media cycle and educate your congregation about it. Once you are in the news, you will continue to be in the news, periodically popping up after everyone thinks the story has gone cold.

7. Be transparent with your congregation. Don't hide things.

8. Take time off. On top of the regular demands of leading a church or other organization, being available to and responding to the media adds layers of extra stress. You owe it to yourself, your family and your congregation to take time off.

9. Have professional help (a counselor or therapist) waiting in the wings. You may need help beyond your family, friends and congregational leaders.

10. Once you appear in the media and give an interview, expect to be contacted again by the media to comment on other news.

A word to us, the media

As the media, there are a few things we must do.

1. We must remember the stories we tell first belong to the people living them and not to us. We owe it to the people to handle their stories as a sacred trust.

2. We must respect the boundaries people establish for themselves, their families and others involved.

3. We must respect any crisis response plan a person or organization may have in place without trying to circumvent the plan.

4. We must be more concerned with honoring people than with being first to tell the story.

Be prepared

So much is out of our control. But not everything. During the chaos of crisis, we can bring some stability and calm by being prepared ahead of time. Seeking media training before crisis happens is a worthy investment.

Eric Black is the executive director, publisher and editor of the Baptist Standard. He can be reached at eric.black@baptiststandard.com.