

When things go wrong! Dealing with the media.

It was a wonderful Sunday and now you settle into a good Monday with all the indications that the week is off to a great start. Little did you know that was all about to change.

He was a great youth pastor. She was 15 and it began innocently enough. It wasn't supposed to happen...but it did. Then her dad caught them and the phone call was now waiting outside the senior pastor's office. This wasn't just any "dad". It was the city councilman who wasn't that crazy about his daughter and her 16 year old brother going to "that" church. To say that the situation has been exacerbated is the understatement of the year.

The pastor takes the call. Damage control begins. The youth pastor is fired. The dad vows to go to the local press regardless of the actions of the church or senior pastor. Guess what? You don't get to vote on whether the media shows up on your doorstep. Like it or not, you now have free publicity!

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG! No pastor ever wants that scenario to develop in the church. Unfortunately, we still live in a world of sin, and even with all precautions in place, you and your staff are vulnerable to sin if we crack the door open.

For purposes of this article I will not address what to do with the Youth Pastor (after you fire him and end his pay that day) or the family in bringing spiritual, emotional, and physical healing to a young lady and the disillusioned parents.

You did not ask for this debacle. However, you are now on point to navigate it. I admonish you to consult your attorney all along the way. You and the church live in a world of redemption. The world lives in a world of litigation. Be wise. Seek counsel.

So what do you do with the media? You now have a major problem with which your local newspaper and television outlets have developed a keen interest. It's not going away. The fallout from this could spell disaster for you and the church.

You want to do everything you can to avoid landing on the front page of the paper or the lead story on the 6 and 10 o'clock news. In this case, you may not have a choice. The dad is angry, and he doesn't care whether your church grows or not. Your mission and his are not in alignment. In his mind, you and the church going the way of other TV evangelists and church leaders will be just fine with him.

Preparation for the unexpected is essential. When things go wrong, you had better be ready with a plan.

My strongest of recommendations is that you begin today to build relationships with local media. Be kind to them. Believe it or not, they are real people with real issues. Sort of like you and I have real issues.

You live with local media. They go to your kids' ballgames and school plays and concerts because their kids are in the same sports/activities as your kids'. They shop at your Wal-Mart and Home Depot. Reach out to them before you need their friendship. Doing the drill the hour after the crisis hits doesn't cut it.

SIX RECOMMENDATIONS*. John Riddle provides six direct recommendations when dealing with the media only. I affirm these observations but do so in relationships with local media. National media are an entirely different animal (sometimes I mean that literally) with which most will not have to deal. That will be for another article. Remember, to state the obvious, do not seek press coverage when things go wrong but when the media shows up, take these six recommendations seriously.

- **Always keep the media well-informed of all developments of a story.**
 - Like it or not, if you try to sugarcoat a public exposure of wrongdoing, you are asking for trouble. You don't have to give gory details, and you need to follow your legal counsel's advice, but you had better tell it straight. Media folks have brains.
- **Don't make the media wait for answers to their questions; they may find their own sources for answers, and those other sources may not be accurate.**
 - You need to keep control of the information. Do not let the media drive the conversation. You lead the dissemination of facts and guide the discussion. Lead the media to the questions you want to answer. Be prepared to move questions to your best presentation of facts.
- **Use only facts. Period. Just facts. Do not give theories, conjecture, or anything but the facts.**
 - That should seem obvious for a church. Don't lie. Don't guess. Don't cover up. Keep facts flowing to the extent you can guide the media's story in the direction you want it to go.
- **Update the information as often as possible.**
 - In many cases, once around with the folks with cameras and writing pads is enough. However, when it isn't, work with the media. Don't fight them. When you do, guess what? You'll lose!
- **Maintain a professional attitude.**
 - For a pastor representing an institution designed to bring life and vitality to the community, dealing with the tragic event may show the community you are the real deal. All eyes are on you. Be professional, be spiritually sensitive, and demonstrate God-honored care for all involved. Be a spiritual statesman. Your church needs that right now. The media will be surprised with it.

- **Have just one person be responsible to answer questions from reporters.**
 - Two and three spokespersons spell disaster. Pick your best, put them up front, and stick with it. That person may be you, and you need to be prepared. When it is not, make sure you are not dodging responsibility.

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG! Why do things go wrong? What happened to that wonderful Sunday? Why does the media want to destroy us? Why can't we reason with people like the father in the example above? What was our Youth Pastor thinking?

Each of those questions can elicit hours of dialogue. For purposes of this writing, simply know that even with the best laid plans, things may go wrong. When they do, have your plan in place. Follow the advice above and of your attorney.

Pray that God will give you favor with the media before tragedy strikes and even in the midst of colossal sinful foolishness. He can, you know. Plan for the worst and pray for the best. You might be amazed how God can carry you through when you do your part to deal with the local media in a straight-forward and God-honoring manner.

(Note: This article is not intended to serve as legal advice or counsel in any way. Consult your attorney when questions arise regarding around this issue.)

*Adapted from *Consulting Business* by John Riddle, (Entrepreneur Press, 2001), pg. 46.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dick Hardy is the Founder and President of *The Hardy Group*, an Executive Consulting firm for senior pastors. Dick brings a wealth of experience to the table for pastors when dealing with the tough issues of the church relative to growth, organization, leadership, administration, and change. His service as administrative pastor at two mega churches and vice president at a flagship denominational Bible college makes him a resource your church will want to retain.

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