

## **Communicating with the Media: Tips for Local Church Leaders**

*(The following information is a compilation of media communication tips from the communication offices of the Michigan and Minnesota Conferences of the United Methodist Church.)*

### ***Understanding the media:***

**News values:** The values that journalists use to determine newsworthiness are:

- Impact
- Timeliness
- Prominence
- Proximity
- Oddity
- Conflict
- Currency
- Human interest

**What reporters look for:**

- fast, accurate information
- exclusives—stories or information that others have not covered
- emotion—personal or eyewitness accounts
- conflict, controversy, cover-up
- concise sound bites or quotes

### ***If you are contacted by the media:***

The media may reach out to get a quote from a pastor/faith leader/church leader regarding a specific topic or issue. If the matter is directly connected to your congregation, commenting can give you an opportunity to control part of the narrative and get accurate information out there. If the topic is more general and related to the broader community and they are simply seeking a voice from a faith leader, do not feel like you have to respond. Remember, if you choose to respond and share your viewpoint, you do so as an individual. Your comments do not represent the local church, conference, or denomination. If you have any questions or concerns, contact your district superintendent and/or the assistant to the bishop for connection and communications. If you choose to respond, the following can be helpful guidance.

### ***Steps for preparing your message:***

• **Have key points you want to express.** Consider what main points you want to communicate regarding the topic. Imagine you are speaking to someone who agrees with you, someone who doesn't, and someone who doesn't have much knowledge about the matter – how can you effectively articulate your perspective to a varied audience? Write down these key points (no more than one sentence each.) Identifying them and letting them guide interviews will help you stay on point and get across exactly what you want to say. Key messages to consider if they interview is directly related to your church:

- >statement of facts
- >church policy
- >compassion and concern for those involved
- >response and prevention

- **Practice your response.** Before doing your interview, rehearse your key points. Have someone ask you questions that a reporter might ask so that you can practice responding. No matter what you are asked, always return to one of the three key messages you identified. Understand that the reporter will likely only use one or two sound bites, not the entirety of your interview, so sticking to your key points and repeating them throughout the interview will ensure that they are what make it into the story.

### ***During interviews with reporters:***

An interview is never a conversation. The purpose of an interview is to share your ideas. If you watch individuals who are interviewed regularly, you will notice regardless of what is being asked the interviewee always returns to their main points. This is called “bridging.” Don’t duck the question, but bridge to your three points by adding a few simple phrases:

- “Here is what I can tell you...”
- “I don’t know about that, but what I can tell you is...”
- “The key thing to remember here is...”
- “What we are focusing on at this time is....”

Remember, you are in control and your responses are what drive the interview—not the questions, as those typically won’t make it into the story.

### ***Dos/Don’ts***

#### **Do:**

- Tell the truth (but remember that you don’t need to share ALL information; be strategic in what and how much you say)
- Keep statements short, simple, and conversational; Reporters need 10-20 seconds sound bites. Longer comments mean you will likely be edited for time often missing your key point.
- Speak in complete sentences; it is okay to pause before answering
- Speak for yourself. You have the right to share your unique point of view. However, it is critical to understand that others may perceive you as an “official” representative of the Dakotas Conference or The United Methodist Church as a whole. For this reason, always be clear that you are speaking only for yourself (e.g. “I can’t speak for others,” “I can’t speculate on what lies in the future.”) Remember that your words and behavior will reflect on your entire church and the denomination.
- Acknowledge challenges, but focus on solutions
- Don’t wait for the perfect question—take control when answering questions and return to your main points (and repeat them throughout the interview)
- Say “I don’t know” when you don’t have specific information requested, but offer to find and provide it

#### **Don’t:**

- Say “no comment” - If you are concerned that your comments may be misconstrued (and honest reporters may accidentally do so), you may politely but firmly decline to share your opinion. You might say if you are a pastor, “I find it best to approach our congregation in a spirit of respect and trust their feedback rather than promote my own opinion.” If you don’t know the

answer, here are possible comments: “I don’t know the answer to that question.” “I don’t know, you might want to ask the conference, or I can get back to you.”

- Get hostile or defensive
  - Repeat negatives
  - Use jargon or acronyms
  - Speculate on others’ feelings or opinions, on the future or on areas outside of your expertise.
- Share only facts. When asked what others’ opinions are, or what you think prevailing opinions are, or others’ motivations, or what might happen as a result of an action or a vote, please do not speculate. (e.g. “I can’t say what will happen, but here is what I can tell you \_\_\_\_.”)
- Speak off the record (assume every conversation with a reporter is on the record)

***If you need assistance:***

Your district superintendent is the best starting point when you’re contacted by a reporter, but the conference assistant to the bishop for connection and communications is also here to assist you in responding to the news media. She can help you prepare your message and feel confident going into interviews. In crisis situations in particular, please contact her:

**Rebecca Trefz**

Assistant to the Bishop for Connection and Communications  
Dakotas Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church  
Phone: 605-550-2848 / Email: [Rebecca.trefz@dakotasumc.org](mailto:Rebecca.trefz@dakotasumc.org)