



# RFI Crisis Toolkit for Religious Institutions

## Communications

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*A non-profit organization based in Washington, DC, RFI is committed to achieving broad acceptance of religious liberty as a fundamental human right, a source of individual and social flourishing, the cornerstone of a successful society, and a driver of national and international security. RFI seeks to advance religious freedom for everyone, everywhere.*

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# I. INTRODUCTION

## Opportunity Amid Challenge

The *RFI Crisis Toolkit for Religious Institutions* (referred to as “Toolkit” throughout) offers practical guidance to help institutions like yours prepare for, mitigate, and respond to crises, while remaining faithful to your core convictions, identity, and mission.

The Toolkit is divided into three modules: *Institutional Governance*, *Communications*, and *Community Relationships*. Together they address threats from lawsuits, smear campaigns, hostile media coverage, adversarial legislation, hostile government legal or administrative action, and more. Even if your institution is a “religion-driven organization,” maintaining an abiding respect for religion and prioritizing the critical role of religious free exercise in society, but not identifying with a single religious faith tradition, this Toolkit is also for you.

The Religious Freedom Institute (RFI) understands religious freedom as a fundamental human right. As an organization, we often use the phrase “free exercise equality” to convey the intent of the Founders in their guarantee of religious free exercise in the First Amendment. “Free exercise equality” means the inalienable, natural, God-given right of religious individuals, communities, and institutions to express religious, moral, and anthropological truths privately and to bring those truths into public life. Lamentably, American society has become increasingly resistant to pluralism and instead seeks to impose uniformity in ways that often run contrary to free exercise equality.

Morally orthodox institutions are particularly at risk of being attacked for their convictions, words, and actions regarding human sexuality, marriage, family, the intrinsic dignity of human life, and the natural, God-given distinctions between females and males. These institutions adhere to principles of right conduct that enable human flourishing, and are consistent with the teachings of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Hostile media coverage, costly court cases, and punitive government actions may undermine, or deny altogether, the right of religious free exercise.

This Toolkit module provides a roadmap to identify and reduce your institution’s vulnerabilities to poten-

tial or current public relations threats. While preparing for and navigating such public relations threats may sometimes be challenging and even costly, doing so also presents an opportunity to strengthen your institution’s commitment to its religious convictions, identity, and mission.

Ultimately, the exercise of becoming more resilient to public relations pitfalls through improving your communications practices can be a vital exercise of your institution’s religious freedom. It can help your institution resist the increasing cultural intimidation intended to silence morally orthodox citizens and shutter their institutions.

## Confessional Religious Institutions and Religion-Driven Organizations

For the purposes of this Toolkit, a confessional religious institution (or “religious institution”) is an entity that aims to embody the teachings of a particular religious faith. These institutions typically organize their identity and mission around a creedal statement, affiliation with a religious denomination or tradition, the teachings of a sacred text, and/or similar communal forms or expressions of a religious faith. Examples of religious institutions include Catholic parishes, Jewish schools, Muslim health clinics, and evangelical Christian universities, to name a few. Most of the elements of this Toolkit are tailored to this kind of institution.

At the Religious Freedom Institute, we use a different term, “religion-driven organization,” to distinguish confessional from non-confessional religious entities. Religion-driven organizations maintain an abiding respect for religion and prioritize the critical role of free exercise of religion in society. Members of these organizations may affiliate individually with different religious traditions. However, the organizations themselves are not based on a formal religious creed and do not affiliate with a particular religious community or tradition. These organizations can be more fully understood by exploring the nature of religion itself within the American tradition. There are many such religion-driven organizations in the areas of humanitarian aid, charitable assistance, human rights advocacy, and interfaith cooperation.

Whether a religion-driven organization enjoys the legal protections for the free exercise of religion remains untested. What is true, nevertheless, is that some of these organizations seek to maintain a morally orthodox ethos and to present themselves publicly as such. Consequently, religion-driven organizations determined to operate and communicate publicly in accord with their morally orthodox commitments will find much of the guidance below to be enormously beneficial.

## The Scope of Religious Freedom

Religious freedom, properly understood, secures the inalienable, natural right of all religious institutions to organize themselves in accord with their religious tenets. Religious freedom is not an individual right alone. It also includes the right of religious communities to found, to organize, and to gather in synagogues, churches, mosques, temples, and other places of worship. Religious freedom, moreover, encompasses the right of religious communities to found and to organize schools, hospitals, homeless shelters, universities, public policy institutes, drug rehabilitation centers, and other institutions that seek to embody and express the teachings of their respective religious traditions. Religious freedom includes the right of religious institutions to influence public policy and the shaping of laws.

Religious freedom protects this full range of congregational and institutional expressions as well as the exercising of religious faith. Though these principles are enshrined broadly in American law, much in the area of institutional religious freedom remains highly contested.

## Preparation Before a Crisis

The effects of putting this module into practice may include: clearer public representations of your institution's commitment to adhering to its religious tenets; a more fully articulated vision for seeking the religious formation of your staff, leadership, board members, donors, and volunteers; and the development of better communications tools for educating key members of the public about the integration of your religion in your institutional structures, policies, and practices. The exercise of becoming more prepared for public relations crises can itself be a vital exercise of your institution's religious freedom and thereby strengthen its public witness.

Many religious institutions are not prepared when a crisis hits. As a result, they often exacerbate the problem by ignoring it or issuing a major press release that extends the life of the story in the media. This is not surprising. Planning a crisis response during a crisis is extremely difficult. But preparing a strategy before a crisis hits—and diligently implementing that strategy during a crisis—can help your institution avoid basic mistakes and return more quickly to the important work of advancing your mission.

Every crisis situation is different and a successful response will always require the flexibility to adapt to unique or unanticipated circumstances. However, the primary objectives of any crisis response should remain the same, no matter the circumstances. If it is inevitable that the crisis your institution is facing will become public, one of your top priorities should be reducing the duration of the related news cycle. When a two-day story becomes a two-month story with compounding coverage, it undermines your capacity to fulfill your mission.

The guidance to follow will aid your institution in its crisis preparation, response, and mitigation efforts. Your particular circumstances may also require consultation with experienced communications professionals to put the Toolkit fully into practice.

**If you have questions or would like referrals to qualified communications professionals who can help you implement the Toolkit, please contact RFI by email at: [RFICrisisToolkit@rfi.org](mailto:RFICrisisToolkit@rfi.org).**





## II. PREPARATION

*This section guides your institution in developing and implementing a strategy and institutional structure for navigating a public relations crisis before one begins.*

**1. Create a Crisis Response Team.** Assemble your Crisis Response Team by identifying key leaders and managers who are responsible for upholding your institution's religious mission, guiding its operations, and shaping the way your institution presents itself to your staff, your volunteers, members of your board, those you serve, your community partners, and the general public. This team will evaluate the risks and potential impacts of an incident that may draw controversy and will develop a communications response plan to represent your institution accurately to your most important audiences.

*NOTE: Members of your crisis response team should coordinate closely with the staff members who lead your efforts to build community relationships, as part of your preparation, mitigation, and response activities. Those responsible for your institution's community relationships will likely have valuable contacts and insights for your communications needs.*

### Potential Crisis Response Team Members:

#### Chief Crisis Officer

The Chief Crisis Officer is responsible for making final decisions—in consultation with the team and appropriate executive leadership—for strategic direction and response messaging.

Responsibilities:

- ◆ Acts as a spokesperson (when appropriate)
- ◆ Approves official statements
- ◆ Sends updates to constituents
- ◆ Reviews and incorporates input from the Board of Directors and other key external collaborators

#### Communications Officer

The Communications Officer is responsible for gathering, monitoring, and sharing information.

Responsibilities:

- ◆ Collaborates with legal counsel and other colleagues, especially relevant subject matter experts and program managers
- ◆ Coordinates news and social media monitoring
- ◆ Oversees messaging and communications roll-out, including website updates if advisable
- ◆ Serves as point of contact for media inquiries
- ◆ Serves as point of contact for external communications advisors
- ◆ Completes incident or crisis worksheets for institutional leaders, documenting the crisis in real-time and later as a post-crisis review to strengthen communications in advance of another potential crisis

### Communications Advisors

Communications advisors—whether experienced members of your staff or consultants associated with an external communications or public relations agency—would be responsible for supporting the Chief Crisis Officer and Communications Officer. They can bring an important perspective to discussions about the potential impact of a crisis incident and how effectively to respond: theirs is chiefly an evaluative and advisory role, rather than one devoted mainly to acting as spokespersons or making executive decisions about strategy and crisis response. In addition to providing messaging and strategic counsel, they can help collect information, develop response materials, and provide some limited support in areas of media outreach and other tasks related to incident response.

Responsibilities:

- ◆ Monitor the news cycle for potential crises
- ◆ Help determine what rises to the level of necessitating a public response
- ◆ Help decide when to update external-facing platforms, especially your website or social media
- ◆ Create talking points and brief spokespeople, as applicable
- ◆ Draft and advise in the development of internal and external statements

- ❖ Develop staff messages
- ❖ Develop an initial public statement that offers a brief account of the matter in question and how your institution is responding (i.e., a “holding statement”) to be released at the outset of the crisis
- ❖ Develop statements and content for external-facing platforms, including website and social media
- ❖ Aid with research, surveys, or polling work that may be required

**2. Build and maintain relationships with the media.**

The Spokesperson, in coordination with the Communications Officer, should be highly involved in crisis mitigation and crisis prevention, as appropriate. Reporters will often contact their “sources”—people with whom they have a relationship—when they first hear of a possible story. Such relationships can enable you to shape a narrative more effectively or push back on false information before it hits a news cycle. A Spokesperson maintaining a healthy, cordial relationship with the right reporter can significantly affect how the public views your institution.

**3. Your institution’s designated Spokesperson should be the sole representative interacting with the media in an interview capacity.**

For example, suppose a reporter arrives at your office building or facility unannounced and interacts with a staff member. That staff member should refrain from answering questions pertinent to the reporter’s visit or providing any information about your institution or other source of controversy. The staff member should instead immediately inform the appropriate Spokesperson (or Communications Officer) and give the reporter his or her contact information.

**4. Provide media and social media training to executive leaders, spokespersons, and other staff members.**

This gives them the tools and confidence necessary to execute a crisis communications plan, interact well with the media, and navigate social media attacks on your institution. Staff may participate in mock interviews as part of this training.

**5. Develop a comprehensive list of potential public perception liabilities** related to your moral and

anthropological orthodoxy on life, marriage, male-female distinctions, family, and human sexuality. This exercise will help you to anticipate the ways your policies, practices, or services may be susceptible to external misunderstandings, willful misrepresentations, or social hostilities.

**6. Based on your list of liabilities, consider developing a complementary list of potential questions, and your institution’s answers to them.**

These answers will address your foundational commitments and associated policies and practices. Look for ways to deploy this resource in staff training to foster discussion and understanding on these important matters, especially regarding truth claims that your institution makes concerning human dignity, love, happiness, freedom, equality, and justice. Write the questions and answers as if you were writing them for a public audience. This will better prepare your staff to speak winsomely on these matters and maximize the consistency with what your institution says internally and externally.

**7. Regularly monitor social media for references to your institution.**

This will help you detect an emerging social media frenzy, prepare for possible responses, and make good judgments about what to do, especially if the frenzy intensifies. Such monitoring is useful regardless of how active your institution is in generating social media content.



**TOPIC RECAP: PREPARATION**

- ❖ **Crisis Response Team**
- ❖ **Media Relationships**
- ❖ **Media Training**
- ❖ **Public Perception Liabilities**
- ❖ **Crisis Messaging**
- ❖ **Social Media**





### III. MITIGATION

*This section guides your institution in developing and implementing a strategy to reduce the severity of a public relations crisis that is imminent or already underway.*

**Minimize the news cycle and avoid contributing to a negative story's growth.** The common reaction when a crisis breaks is to issue a response. In many cases this tactic prolongs the coverage and public conversation. The goal should be to minimize the impact of the crisis and allow it to resolve as quickly as possible. If your team decides it would be beneficial to engage with the news media, you can communicate via phone, text, in-person discussion, or email. You also have various options for making a public statement, such as a press release, social media post, or website announcement.

The following methods for engaging reporters for interviews can be pursued as needed:

#### Methods for Engaging Reporters

❖ **Off-the-record.** The reporter agrees not to attribute information to an institution or Spokesperson. Always confirm this is the case before sharing information with a reporter. Off-the-record discussions

are useful for informing the story or providing contextual information or analysis, but they are not to be quoted or paraphrased in the story itself.

- ❖ **On-the-record.** The reporter can publicly use anything the Spokesperson says or shares and attribute that information to him or her. If the Spokesperson and reporter do not agree on parameters beforehand, the reporter can use any information the Spokesperson provides for the story and attribute quotes to the Spokesperson on behalf of the institution.
- ❖ **On-background-only.** A reporter may use information the Spokesperson shares in a story but will not attribute the information to him or her by name. On-background-only can contribute to the story while concealing the Spokesperson's name and affiliation.

*NOTE: It is advisable to obtain written confirmation from a reporter indicating his or her agreement to have an "off-the-record" or "on-background-only" conversation. Securing mutual agreement on the precise terms of a conversation with a reporter before it occurs is critical.*





## Factors for Deciding which Method To Use

Decide whether to engage reporters via any of the above methods on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the following factors:

- ❖ Addressing a crisis publicly with a written statement attributed to an institution's Spokesperson or executive leader may be inadequate in some circumstances. An "on-the-record" conversation may be preferable to help further reinforce public perceptions of transparency.
- ❖ Avoiding the appearance of an executive leader or representative's name in a story may be a high priority in some cases. Accordingly, an institution could utilize an "on-background-only" conversation to share factually correct information and context without attributable quotes.
- ❖ Forgoing any public-facing engagement may be preferred in limited circumstances. An institution could utilize an "off-the-record" conversation in this instance to address key issues with the reporter without appearing in the story.

The Spokesperson and Communications Officer must remain alert to opportunities to avoid public relations crises. This includes engaging key reporters on the front end of a breaking story to rebut at the outset any misinformation or misunderstandings that may later contribute to accelerating the crisis. Forging relationships with strategically placed reporters prior to the outset of a public relations crisis will enable immediate action on this front when the need arises.



### TOPIC RECAP: MITIGATION

- ❖ **Negative News Cycle**
- ❖ **Engaging Reporters:**
  - Off-the-record
  - On-the-record
  - On-background-only
- ❖ **Avoid PR Crises**





## IV. RESPONSE

*This section guides your institution in developing strategies and sound practices for responding to a public relations crisis as it is unfolding.*

- 1. Foster an accurate perception of your institution's religious mission and core identity.** If engagement is necessary to reduce or end the news coverage, act quickly and thoughtfully to ensure your message is part of the narrative. Carefully analyze your institution's potential public relations risks. Consider the range of public perception liabilities that may be most pressing given the nature of the emerging or ongoing controversy and determine what your response would be if a national or local media outlet contacted you about it.
- 2. Exemplify leadership during a crisis by conveying messages focusing on the good of the policy, program, or other matter at issue.** When public engagement is necessary, messages should avoid repeating the negative arguments and instead focus on the positive reasons for your institution's policies and programs—i.e., what an institution forbids based on its religious tenets will also have affirmative aspects, which might need to be stated explicitly. Before, during, and after a crisis, it is vital that you apply and express your religious tenets in both their negative and positive dimensions, consistently and transparently across the institution.
- 3. Strive to maintain the confidence of key external partners and other interested parties throughout the crisis.** It is impossible to please all audiences, especially when a crisis relates to matters of moral orthodoxy. Identifying your main audiences and understanding their perspectives on the crisis is critical. You may need to tailor your communications strategy and messaging accordingly as a means to preserve relationships with these priority partners.
- 4. Take the opportunity to “tell your story,” where applicable.** If a crisis persists, capitalize on the opportunity to tell your institution's “story” when it makes sense to do so. For example, throughout the ongoing litigation against them, the Little Sisters of the Poor were able to communicate their history,

mission, activities, and contribution to the common good through media coverage and appearances that went beyond what their legal case required.

- 5. Manage and interact with the media in a timely and effective manner once the decision is made to address a controversy publicly.**
  - ❖ Show a willingness to engage on the matter in question. If reporters cannot get answers from you—via your Spokesperson, a press release, or another means of communication—they will pursue other people whom you may not want to speak on behalf of your institution.
  - ❖ Strive to provide reporters with accurate information to help them correct or avoid errors. If they encounter the truth, they may even discontinue the story that would have reflected unjustly on your institution.
- 6. Navigate rapidly escalating, social media-driven crises in a measured and thoughtful way.** Highly charged controversies and disputes on social media often attract the most uncharitable, extreme voices, or even “trolling.” However, the volume or stridency of social media attacks are not always reliable indicators that an actual public relations crisis is at hand. Monitoring the situation and maintaining proper perspective is vital.

Some of the following guidelines presuppose that your institution is already active on social media. If that is not the case, you might consider other means of communicating your message, should you choose to respond, e.g., through the social media of a trusted staff member or external ally. Avoid launching social media just to respond to a public relations crisis.

  - ❖ Remember that hostility expressed on social media, especially Twitter, is likely to be more limited in scope than it may at first seem. The selection bias of the population expressing outrage, and the ways these platforms operate, can engender short attention spans on the part of pile-on participants. A perceived crisis on social media may dissipate as quickly as it emerged. The right option might be to wait for the moment to pass.



- ❖ If your institution decides to respond on social media, generally avoid engaging in direct exchanges with particular people or organizations. Such an approach may lend credibility to opponents where none is due.
- ❖ Discourage your staff from responding directly to a social media frenzy on your institution's behalf unless you authorize them to do so. Real or perceived variances in the tone or substance of your institution's responses could make the situation worse.
- ❖ Responses that sound defensive or evasive may further incite those inclined to join in expressing mass opposition to your institution on social media. Social media attackers may even believe they are doing good by publicly urging your institution to reform what they believe are its "harmful" ways. Accordingly, your response should show that your institution is committed to justice and everyone's well-being as it lives out its deeply held religious, moral, and anthropological convictions that invariably shape what justice and well-being entail.

- ❖ In your social media messages, apply the principles put forth in the following Messaging section (adapted to the technical parameters of the platform(s) on which you respond).
- ❖ In more extreme social media-driven crises, consider consulting a qualified external communications advisor to advise and assist.



## TOPIC RECAP: **RESPONSE**

- ❖ **Accurate Perception of Your Mission**
- ❖ **Communicate the Good**
- ❖ **Maintain Confidence of Key Partners**
- ❖ **"Tell Your Story"**
- ❖ **Effective Interaction with Media**
- ❖ **Navigating Social Media**







## V. MESSAGING

*This section guides your institution in developing language for effective external communications informed by and compatible with your religious mission and core identity. Messaging tone, emphasis, scope, and cultural intelligibility are each addressed.*

The messaging your institution employs is integral to your communications plan. A public statement can be perceived very differently based on a change in a single word. Particular words may comfort or agitate an audience. It is therefore critical that you consider who will speak on your institution's behalf, the assumptions and tendencies of the audience(s) who will hear your message in a given circumstance, and the setting in which your message will be delivered. Keep the following general principles in mind in scenarios in which you need to defend your institution's religious freedom.

### 1. **Maintain a charitable and compassionate tone.**

Love for one's neighbor, as a good in and of itself, indivisible from love for God, is a central tenet of many religions. It can also have the effect of softening the views of someone who disagrees with you or even has dehumanized your institution, your institution's people, or you. Use a charitable style of communication, and if helpful to reach your audience, make the connection between God's love for all people and what your institution teaches and promotes. Additionally, remember that for most contentious matters people have related personal experiences that often involve anger or hurt. Be compassionate and try to understand and relate to that anger or hurt.

### 2. **Emphasize what you are for, not only what you are against.**

Many ideological activists, for example, equate morally orthodox convictions on the family with bigotry. In response to such hostility, focus on why your vision of the family is good for children and society rather than on what your convictions forbid. Moreover, if your message is focused on behavior or institutions, and not people per se, it is important to clarify your teachings to render misguided allegations of "discrimination" as much less convincing. When possible and in accord with your religious tenets, refer positively to "convictions about the beauty of human sexuality" or "convictions about the beauty of marriage." If, on the other hand, you focus on the

exclusion or denial of a person, group of people, or identity, you will most likely harm your institution publicly and possibly legally as well as undermine the teachings of your own religious tradition.

3. **"Show" instead of "tell."** People prefer stories to lectures. Personal stories convince them more than abstract arguments. While you should make clear points, wherever possible use personal anecdotes and other examples to bring your principles to life. Paint a vivid picture to "tell your story" and communicate in a more human manner. Additionally, avoid excessively relying on facts, figures, and statistics to make your main points (although it is good to use these to illustrate points.)

4. **Confidently articulate your convictions and refrain from debate in your messaging.** Merely asserting your religious, moral, and anthropological commitments about marriage, sexuality, life, family, or other contentious subjects in the media, including social media, is usually counterproductive. A substantive conversation on sensitive topics such as these is unlikely to happen in the media, where many resolutely oppose your moral orthodoxy and the time or space allowed for you to make your case is typically far too restricted.

The primary objective of your initial messaging is not to change opponents' and critics' minds. Instead, aim to ensure your institution's religious mission, convictions, and practices are accurately represented publicly. Explain why your convictions are loving and reflect your understanding of genuine human well-being and fulfillment. Show how these convictions, when lived well, have contributed positively to American public life.

5. **Consider referencing other religions in your messaging.** Many morally orthodox practitioners of different religions share similar views on marriage, sexuality, life, family, and many other subjects that may occasion attacks on your institution. At times, it is beneficial to associate these views with faith in general, not just your specific faith. Attacks against hiring rights are good opportunities to group your position (or convictions) with those of other religious traditions. One could ar-



gue, for example, “It is only common sense that religious institutions—whether Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, or of another faith—should be able to appoint leaders who share their religious convictions.”

6. Consider **highlighting broadly shared principles**. Disagreement on certain critical subjects does not necessitate signaling disagreement on everything. Be charitable in your tone toward opponents, while remaining uncompromising in your commitment to your religious mission, view of reality, and core identity. For example, while resolutely supporting life-affirming alternatives to abortion, and opposing abortion, communicate clearly about the shared principle of caring for mothers and explain how your stance actually realizes or illustrates that principle.



## TOPIC RECAP: MESSAGING

- ❖ **Charitable Tone**
- ❖ **Emphasize What You Are For**
- ❖ **“Show” Instead of “Tell”**
- ❖ **Articulate Your Convictions**
- ❖ **Reference Other Religions**
- ❖ **Highlight What You Share with Critics**







## VI. INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

*This section guides the leadership of your institution in communicating with your staff. While external communications rightly receive substantial attention, establishing consistent and principled internal communications practices will also be critical when a crisis is imminent or already underway.*

- 1. Internal communications can shape external perceptions of your institution.** Your entire staff can be key representatives of your institution, both in and out of the workplace. It is, therefore, essential to communicate internally in a manner that consistently reinforces your religious mission and core identity. Communicate internally on a regular basis not only to keep your staff informed, but also to model how everyone should talk about your institution's convictions and practices. Emails, video messages, town halls, and internal digital communications tools may be useful for engaging the valuable members of your staff.
- 2. Internal communications can be leaked.** Staff or others affiliated with your institution may leak your internal communications. So convey messages that accurately reflect your religious mission and core identity. On occasion, some staff members may disagree with your institution's convictions or practices. It is possible that some of them may intentionally leak emails and audio from meetings in order to harm your institution or try to bring about institutional change. This regrettable possibility should not be interpreted as grounds for avoiding internal communication. Rather, view engagement between leadership and staff as occasions to build mutual understanding and trust.
- 3. Internal communications reinforce core religious principles.** People can become complacent, and even forgetful, about an institution's core commitments. Regularly providing internal messages that emphasize what your institution believes is beneficial for reinforcing those foundational commitments. You should also seek to convey internal messages in a manner that models how your colleagues should speak about your institution's convictions. Two people can speak in support of the same position and yet, by what they say and how they say it, give two

very different impressions about your religious institution's convictions, identity, and mission.

- 4. Internal communications can strengthen institutional understanding and consistency on contentious subjects.** Charged subjects merit proactive communication coming formally from leadership and occurring informally among staff. This approach fosters consistency in what your institution says and does privately and publicly. This proactive communication can also be an opportunity to educate, form, and inform personnel and volunteers about your institution's views and corresponding practices. Be clear that questions are welcome and that you do not fear responding to them.

Good-faith discussion can help test, ground, and mature staff understandings. Presenting some of this messaging in the form of training can also equip your employees and volunteers to withstand internal and external challenges to the institution's moral orthodoxy. Keep an open door between staff and leadership on these important matters.



### TOPIC RECAP: INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

- ❖ **Shape External Perceptions**
- ❖ **Prepare For Leaks**
- ❖ **Reinforce Core Principles**
- ❖ **Strengthen Institutional Understanding**





## VII. CONCLUSION

Planning a crisis response during a crisis is extraordinarily difficult. Achieving a successful outcome requires making a plan before a crisis hits. Having a sound, multifaceted communications plan—encompassing the elements of preparation, mitigation, response, messaging, and internal communications—is vital to that effort and will help you to navigate through and beyond future crises.

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# Addressing Public Relations Crises with Effective Communications

## CHECKLIST

### Preparation

- Create a Crisis Response Team with roles such as:

- Chief Crisis Officer
- Communications Officer
- Communications Advisors

- Build and maintain relationships with members of the media.
- Designate a spokesperson to manage and interact with the media in an interview capacity.
- Provide media and social media training to executive leaders, spokespersons, and other staff members.
- Develop a comprehensive list of your institution's potential public perception liabilities.

- Identify questions you may be asked about these liabilities and develop answers to them.
- Incorporate these questions and answers and related subject matter into your staff training.

- Regularly monitor social media for references to your institution.

### Mitigation

- Minimize the news cycle and avoid contributing to a negative story's growth:

- Consider all essential factors, as to whether to respond directly and publicly to a given controversy.
- Engage reporters on the front end of a breaking story that your institution has determined requires a public response, in order to rebut any misinformation or misunderstandings.
- Decide which methods to use for engaging with reporters: off-the-record, on-the-record, or on-background-only.

### Response

- Foster an accurate perception of your institution's religious mission, identity, and practices.
- Exemplify leadership during a crisis by conveying messages that underscore the good of the policy, program, or other subject under scrutiny.
- Maintain the confidence of key external partners and other interested parties by tailoring your communications strategy and messaging in a way that helps them understand your position.
- Take the opportunity to "tell your story" when applicable.
- Interact with the media in a timely and effective manner once you make a decision to address a controversy publicly.
- Navigate rapidly escalating, social media-driven crises in a measured and thoughtful way.
- Integrate community relations into your communications response.

### Messaging

- Maintain a charitable and compassionate tone.
- Emphasize what you are for and show its relationship with what you are against.
- "Show" instead of "tell" by communicating personal stories rather than principles alone.
- Avoid debating your institution's religious commitments in your messaging.
- Highlight that your religious tradition stands alongside others in holding the convictions now drawing controversy.
- Highlight broadly shared principles between you and your opponents.

### Internal Communications

- Regularly communicate internally to keep your staff informed and to model how everyone should talk about your institution and its convictions and practices.
- Use internal communications to reinforce core religious principles among staff.
- Use internal communications to strengthen institutional understanding and consistency on contentious subjects.



## GLOSSARY

**Anthropological:** pertaining to the reality of human beings, human nature, and human goods.

**Common Good:** the social conditions that together objectively enable individuals and groups to more completely and easily flourish and reach their fulfillment.

**Free Exercise Equality:** the inalienable right of religious individuals, institutions, and communities to express their understanding of religious truths in their private lives, as well to bring that understanding into public life through their respective claims about justice, peace, equality, and freedom on a basis equal to all others in society.

**Moral Orthodoxy:** a set of principles of right conduct that are consistent with the historical teachings of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, especially regarding sexuality, marriage, family, the immutability of being female or male, and the intrinsic dignity of human life.

**Religion:** the human search for truths and ultimate meaning from an external source that is supernatural and greater-than-human, and the ordering of one's life in accord with those truths.

**Religious Community:** A deep association of individuals and institutions bound together by a shared set of convictions about ultimate reality (including that there is a greater-than-human source) that inform their sacred practices, anthropological understandings, and moral commitments. Governments and non-government actors sometimes use affiliation with a religious community as the basis for invidious discrimination and other forms of religious persecution.

**Religious Exercise:** living out one's faith in private and public life, individually and communally.

**Religious Freedom:** the inalienable, natural right of all persons to believe, speak, and act – individually and in community with others, in private and in public – in accord with their understanding of ultimate truth that has a greater-than-human source.

**Religious Institution:** an entity that aims to embody the teachings of a particular religious faith and which can act and be acted upon in society. These institutions typically organize their identity and mission around a creedal statement, affiliation with a religious denomination or tradition, the teachings of a sacred text, and/or similar communal forms or expressions of a religious faith. Examples include, but are not limited to, worship congregations, religious schools and universities, and religious organizations, including those that provide social services.

**Religion-Driven Organization:** an organization that maintains an abiding respect for religion and is often informed by the religious commitments of its founders, executive leadership, and other staff, but does not look to a formal religious creed or have a legal relationship with a religious denomination or tradition.



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