

Dealing with the Media

Communication is at the heart of the Church. Jesus was a skilled communicator, who spread the word and the message of God's love through powerful stories which continue to resonate today.

Our Church is blessed with great communicators. Ministers and elders understand their communities. They are skilled in finding the right language and tone to reflect all that life brings to the people they live alongside. The Church is the cornerstone of the parish. It is the place to celebrate joyous events and the sanctuary to find solace in difficult times.



When Tragedy strikes

Often, ministers and elders are asked to speak for the community when tragedy strikes. The most awful events are usually unexpected. They provoke strong emotional responses as people seek to understand what has happened and why. They also attract the attention of the media. Journalists often gather with surprising speed in the midst of the community bringing cameras, satellite vehicles and all the expectations of finding the instant answers demanded by today's rolling television news culture. This can feel unwelcome and intimidating.

The Communications Department support in managing the Media

The Communications Department is a valuable resource dedicated to supporting ministers, elders and their congregations in dealing with the media, particularly in reaction to tragic circumstances. Staffed by experienced journalists, the Communications Department knows how the media operates. Every tragedy is unique in itself, but the media reaction to these events is predictable. In understanding the media's expectations, the leadership of ministers and elders at an early stage can relieve pressure on the entire community. This has proven to be the case recently in Glasgow, responding to both the helicopter and bin lorry crashes which claimed multiple lives, at Edinburgh's Liberton High School, following the death of a pupil under a collapsed wall and in Cumbernauld, where members of the congregation had been killed during a terrorist attack in Tunisia.

The Communications Department is available twenty-four hours a day to respond to tragic events, and provide support in managing the media. Often, journalists will call the Church media team to break bad news even before the Minister has been informed. The Communications Department can act as a buffer between the media and Minister and Elders, taking all the phone calls, considering all the interview requests, writing any statements and being present in the parish to facilitate any television interviews. This service is a safety net for the local congregation and is intended to minimise disruption to the important pastoral work supporting local parishioners.

Experience has shown journalists continue to have great respect for the function ministers serve in the community. Ministers are skilled in providing an appropriate initial reaction which is beyond the

function of the emergency services. Ministers are also usually completely independent of any possible involvement or culpability in the circumstances surrounding a tragic event. This is not always the case for local politicians and agencies.

Church as an alternative focal point for Media attention

When a tragedy occurs within the parish, journalists will always gather as close to the scene as possible and seek to find eyewitnesses and those personally affected by the event. This can be distressing to the community and unhelpful for emergency services. The church can act as an alternative focal point for media attention. A book of condolence can be a dignified and thoughtful expression of a community's sense of loss. Lit candles can provide a powerful evocation of sorrow and hope. Facilitating access to suitably prepared people in such appropriate settings can satisfy the media's initial demands for content and decrease the intrusion felt by the surrounding community.

Inevitably, the media will be interested in the first church service following any tragic event. The minister's message to the congregation is a public statement articulating the community's reaction and setting the tone for its response as it seeks reconciliation. This is a natural reflection of the Church's rightful place in the community. If the Church is not visible in the darkest of times, questions may be asked as to what purpose it serves. Correctly facilitated, this can be enormously empowering for the congregation in realising its meaning and value within the parish.

The Church is also the natural place to bring the whole community together for a special service or memorial in the aftermath of a tragedy, or on key anniversaries which follow. Often, these will be demanded by the community, and can be interfaith. The Communications Department can assist organising and publicising such services, and managing media access where appropriate.

Dealing with tragic events is a daily part of the Church's work. Every congregation should know how to contact the Communications Department, and consider how it would respond should a newsworthy event occur within the parish.

Further reading and resources

The Communications Department at the Church of Scotland national offices (121 George Street, Edinburgh) - on-call number 07854 783 539 (twenty-four hours a day)