

## Crisis communication strategies used in Kenya's churches before during and after crises: The case of one local Church in Nairobi County

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### Abstract

This study evaluated crisis communication strategies used in churches to communicate during a crisis. It focused mainly on crisis communication strategies used in a local Church (PBC) in Nairobi, Kenya. The study's main objective was to find out the crisis communication strategies that are used to communicate before during and after a crisis occurs in the church in the past 5 years. The study employed a mixed research approach and a case study method. It was established that, a sizeable number of congregants in the church indicated to have observed different crises. It was inferred that the church used the apology strategy, where 67.1% of the respondents indicated apology and taking responsibility strategy had been observed as the most common strategy in handling a crisis. However it was also confirmed that there were no written crisis communication plans because the leadership highly depends on divine intervention.

**Keywords:** crisis, church, congregants, crisis preparedness, crisis communication plans, crisis strategies

### 1. Introduction

A crisis is traditionally defined as an unusual situation or unexpected event that can affect individuals or organisations. It may cause financial and reputational damage, or can threaten stakeholder relations (Coombs, 2009; Pearson & Clair, 1998; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2007) <sup>[11]</sup>. Crises can range from political crises, corporate crises, to racial or religious crises. Local churches and their leaders face crisis just like corporations (Legg 2008) <sup>[7]</sup>.

In our local Kenyan situation many churches have been accused of commercialization of faith. Churches such as JIAM, Neno evangelism, Maximum miracles and Finger of God have all gone through devastating losses, after being faced with crises. Legg (2008) <sup>[7]</sup> states that Even when a crisis does not receive national attention, it is still likely to be detrimental to the reputation and viability of the church.

### 2. Literature review

Nyambura (2013) <sup>[9]</sup> observes that the main threats to the church are fake pastors, greed, immorality, corruption and acts of terror. She illustrates with the case of Prophet Victor Kanyari who has been accused constantly of asking money as a form of a 'seed' to be planted so that God release miracles. Such individuals and their churches have not been seen to do much to restore the confidence and the trust that congregation, church investors, employees, church managers' other faith based institutions and the government may have lost in the institutions hit by crises.

Mutambo (2014) <sup>[8]</sup> cites Pastor Geoffrey Maingi of the Redeemed Gospel Church who was reported to have been found dead in the house of a Buruburu woman who was not his wife. Speculators believed it was a case of excessive sexual arousal medication. In televised interviews, church members expressed their loss of confidence in the church as their elders refused to talk to the media on the matter and there is a likelihood that the believers choose to defect to

other churches after the elders refused to declare or to communicate their stance on the matter.

Mutambo (2014) <sup>[8]</sup> further gives another example of an earlier case of a pastor in the Kenya Assemblies of God Church in Embu. He had been caught in a hotel with a married woman. The woman's husband, a mechanic, said they had earlier consulted the same pastor for counseling due to matrimonial issues they experienced. The later issued a public apology to his family and as well as his congregation. As a show of remorse for his actions, he asked for forgiveness on national television consequently, his church forgave him. He is still is a pastor whose integrity is not under the questioning of his congregants. His image and reputation was redeemed.

Another case is that reported by Oketch and Mwakio (2013) <sup>[10]</sup>. They point to an event where a pastor was shot dead inside his church in Mombasa while praying on a Saturday night. He was found dead while still seated on a chair with the Holy Bible firmly clutched in his hands. The killing sparked anger and anxiety from Christian faithful in Mombasa. The police ruled out terrorism but they described it 'as normal crime'. There was no clear statement offered from the church through the media to its congregants to restore the confidence of believers in attending the church.

An organisation such as the church needs to handle crises efficiently and effectively to streamline its messaging and avoid negative outcomes such as the threat of lawsuits, church closure, lack of trust with the congregants, a loss of credibility with the church, financial losses and church breakaways. All these result from crises such as corruption in churches, lawsuits, and robbery, and financial mismanagement, governments ordering the closure of churches as well as the death or resignation of church leaders. It is prudent to minimise the incidences and the duration of crises. Organisations therefore require crisis planning and good communication methodologies. So there is need to examine

the crisis preparedness of churches as a matter of routine and not just during crisis situations (Harrison, 2007) <sup>[6]</sup>.

Situational crisis communication theory establishes common practices for handling crises in organizations; it is also called crisis management. Crisis management has been researched over the past few years. Frageli and Johansen (2003) <sup>[3]</sup> and Goodman (1994) define crisis management as a 'response' activity during a crisis. Fearn-Banks (2011) <sup>[4]</sup> adds a definition of the concept of 'crisis management' as a process of strategic planning aimed at preventing and responding to a crisis or negative occurrence. He asserts that the process removes some of the risk and uncertainty and allows the organization to be in greater control of its future.

As for Peterson (2002) he notes that the objective of organizational crisis management is to make timely decisions based on facts and clear thinking when operating under extraordinary conditions. If one has a thorough understanding of the essential basis of crisis management, the impact of all crises can be reduced. By having the right plans and capabilities in place before a crisis occurs, the damage to an organization can be minimized and the time to recover from it can be shortened (Mitroff & Anagnos, 2001). Research on vulnerability analysis, examining stakeholder messaging and a dedication to the development of critical relationships represent a proactive approach to crisis planning. Strategies such as these make an organisation more competent in production, communication and administration (Fisher, 2013). Fisher has explored religious leaders and how they analyse image restoration strategies. His research employed content analysis to examine crisis communication responses and audience reception of religious leaders involved in scandals. He used Benoit's image repair strategies and the contingency theory to determine the strategies and stances of mega church leaders such as Jim Bakker, Ted Haggard, Eddie long, Henry Lyons and Jimmy Swaggart.

Fisher (2013) found that News framing theory determined media and audience reception of the religious leaders' crisis communication responses. The study concludes that the religious leaders dominant strategies were bolstering and denial as well as the media portrayals were balanced in redeeming their church's image in the event of church business threat.

Ndeti (2013) recommends that Kenyan companies should endeavor to apply situational crisis communication theory in making choices of appropriate crisis responses that fit the concerns of the overall responses. She argues that in the field of communication, crisis responses should always be done in consideration of the stakeholders' concerns. Failure to adhere to stakeholders' concerns may lead to bad reputation of an organization and consequently a total collapse.

### 3. Methodology

This study employed sequential explanatory mixed approach. It involved the use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches. A questionnaire and an interviews schedule were used to collect data. Questionnaires were administered to the church congregants while interviews were administered to the church management.

Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) <sup>[15]</sup> argue that, a researcher needs to pick a target population from which to generalize the results of a study. The sample population for this study was

approximately 122 members. The congregants were grouped under different categories; gender, age groups of the church and the staff in various departments. Kombo and Tromp (2011) state that stratified random sampling involves dividing your population into homogeneous subgroups and then taking a simple random sample in each subgroup. The sample was selected in such a way as to ensure that certain subgroups in the population were represented in proportion to their number in the population.

Before picking the desired subjects in the population, the subjects were selected in such a way that the existing subgroups in the population would be producing the sample. In this case the sampling frame involved a list of elements in the population which were selected in the following way: 10% of the population from the church management body, 10% of each of the following ministries: Golden Girls' ministry, Missions Ministry, Maturity Ministry, Benevolence ministry, Couples ministry and the Youth Ministry. Data collection occurred immediately after church service. On the other hand the qualitative sample for the study was through snowballing. I relied on the judgement of managers to show me expert respondents for the study.

### 4. Findings

The researcher used six items to assess the strategies used in communicating crisis in church. A range of strategies were offered in item 7 and the respondents were to indicate on a 3 point scale the frequency of the strategy use. The researcher sought to find out the strategies used by church management to communicate church crisis.

The results indicated that 65.8 % had never observe denial strategy being used. Some respondents who comprised 29.1% reported that the denial strategy was used on rare basis while others reported that the strategy was used often. In addition 49.4% of the respondents indicated that the argument that a crisis was not as bad as people had perceived was never used while some of the 21.3% reported that the argument was used on rare occasions and others said it was used often.

Further, 69.6% of the respondents showed that denying the intent to do harm strategy was never used. However, some of the 17.8% of the respondents showed that denying the intent to do harm was used on rare occasions and others reported that the strategy was used often.

Question item 7 C, D and E were used to assess whether lessening the damage by justifying the crisis, giving material or symbolic forms of aid to victims and apology specifying that the organisation is taking full responsibility were used as strategies in communicating crisis.

The respondents were asked to give the frequency of use of the strategies and the findings show that some respondents comprising 50.6% reported that they never heard the damage caused by a crisis being lessened through justifying the crisis. However, some of the 40% of the respondents reported that they had heard the church lessening the damage caused by a crisis through justifying on rare and often occasion.

In addition, 29.1% reported that the strategy of giving material or symbolic forms of aid to victims had never been used. However, some of 62 % respondents said the strategy was used rarely and other said the strategy of giving material or symbolic forms of aid to victims was used often. The respondents also reported on the use of full apology and taking full responsibility. Some respondents who comprised

24.1% reported that the use of apology and taking responsibility had never been used. However, 67.1% of the respondents indicated that the apology and taking responsibility strategy had been observed by some on a rare basis and by others often.

In order to meet the objective of finding out the types of strategies used, four respondents in the management of the church were interviewed on crisis preparedness. They said that the church already had an elected team that is closely guided on protocols of organizing activities. It was also confirmed that there were usually no written crisis communication plans because the leadership highly depended on God's guidance and protection for safety. They firmly believed that God had given them knowledge on how to communicate to their stakeholders. This was as stated by respondent A01:

We have a management board that sits to discuss issues of concern with the church, however we don't have crisis plans or written documents to guide us on how to manage a crisis. We firmly believe that we God's wisdom shall be upon us in the issue of elevating a crisis.

The researcher also investigated how the church management had in the past prepared towards crisis communication. The respondents reported that the church operated through a series of meetings on planning the church activities however the committees running the meetings were not equipped with ways of planning in the event of a crisis. This was as reported by respondent A02:

There are different special committees which give continual reports to ensure that the church is well-informed on matters concerning different initiatives. This is usually placed in bulletins and through various announcements. The same committee convenes meetings to state and explain why a project might not have been completed on time. This is done to ensure that there will be no speculation thus eliminating any possibility of rumors. However, these meetings plan to execute the normal running of the church activities and they are not for dealing with crises.

In addition, the PBC's hierarchical structure does not allow public relations personnel to advise on what to be said in the church in the event of a crisis. This was evidenced by respondent B02:

In the church structure of leadership we don't have a leader who comes from the public relations department, or who plays a public relations advisory role. We believe that as a management body we can be able to sort out issues arising even without getting expertise from a public relations person. Furthermore, their professional qualifications may be an obstacle as to how well a crisis can be communicated on behalf of the church. It was found that there is little or no planning in communicating crises that are likely to occur. This was as established by respondent B02:

We have had instances where we know a crisis occurs. However even when the church employs a public relations department, it is not on the issues of a crisis and what should be said to either control the crisis. Rather it is mostly about the advertising material such as brochures and church catalogues for printing. Even when we know that public relations is pivotal in averting a crisis.

## 5. Discussion

The findings from the qualitative aspect of this research agree with the literature reviewed. That the church committees and

church leaders do not have the expertise on solving crisis or on discussing how they can plan ahead for crisis this is as established by Fearn-Banks (2011) <sup>[4]</sup> who asserts that a lot of managers are not taught the importance of handling crises early. She further argues that in times of crisis the head of the company or organisation does not listen because business schools often teach CEO's to make their own decision. As such, Fearn-Banks further suggests that in the event of crises when everyone else is in a state of panic, public relations practitioners must offer a calming presence and also advise management on the best measures to undertake in order to ease losses during crises.

The researcher also assessed the strategies used in communicating with congregants and other stakeholders when crisis hits the church. The findings indicated that crisis was observed to be communicated mostly after a crisis had occurred. However, more than 8.9% indicated that they observed communication before crisis had happened and also less than a fifth indicated that crisis communication happened during a crisis. The implication of this finding is that Parklands Baptist church mainly communicates after handling a crisis. The management is fearful of when information about a crisis is to be released and therefore they end up being secretive. This explains why the congregants do not know of the existence of the crisis happening.

Coombs (2012) <sup>[2]</sup> says that different crisis situations facilitate certain attributions of organization responsibility for a crisis. The stronger the attribution of organization responsibility on a crisis, the more likely it is that negative aspects of the crisis will damage the organization.

It was noted that 20-45% of congregants responding indicated that the church is using the following strategies:- denial strategy, denying the intent to do harm, giving aid in the form of materials to victims, full apology, arguing that a crisis is not as bad as people thought and lessening the damage by justifying the crisis. Coombs (2012) <sup>[2]</sup> explains that an organization is likely to use the denial strategy if it is not involved in a crisis. There are times when PBC has had to deny that it was involved in a crisis. Denial also happens when the crisis manager declares that there is no crisis yet it actually exists and this might have happened at Parklands Baptist Church.

It was also noted that denying the intent to do harm is practiced as strategy under diminishing strategies by Ndeti (2014). In this case the crisis manager uses excuse as a strategy which involves denying intent to do harm or claiming inability to control the events caused by the crisis. Parklands Baptist church is likely to use excuse as a way to lower an organization's connection to the crisis or have people view the crisis negatively.

The church also communicates through material or symbolic forms of aid. (peterson) establishes that one of the ways of improving an organization's reputation is by offering material or symbolic forms of aid to victims. The crisis manager is usually seen to declare that there is a crisis and therefore takes positive actions to offset the crisis.

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