

Diocesan Policy and Parish Guidelines
for Media Relations
in the Diocese of Rupert's Land

Approved by Diocesan Council – February 19, 2005

Who is it for?

This document outlines diocesan policy for interaction with the media. It is applicable to all clergy and employees who are under the jurisdiction of the Bishop, as well as for wardens and volunteers e.g., chairpersons of groups sanctioned by the diocese.

The “theological foundation” is that positive media relations will reflect that we serve Jesus Christ and the people of the church by reflecting spiritual life and ethos of and within the Diocese of Rupert's Land.

Why Do We Need It?

In the past, the Diocese has at times dealt effectively with media, but there have been occasions when it has failed to respond effectively to the media and suffered the consequences. This policy is designed to assist diocesan leadership, clergy and lay leaders dealing effectively with the media inquiries. It is also designed so that the contacts with the media should not be damaging to the person being interviewed, a parish and the Diocese.

In theory, the media should have objective, factual coverage that includes both sides of an issue, and without any personal biases or beliefs affecting the news or feature story. However, the secular media also may accentuate the negative, controversial or sensational aspects of a story. Reporters have their own personal experiences with the church that filters answers. A few may have ambition to have the story be part of his or her own career advancement.

The majority of news business is so rushed in meeting deadlines that there is little time to do any research or understand background. This may affect accuracy. The media will make contact when they consider there is a story. The reporter and producer or editor usually already knows what the focus of the story will be and may or may not share it.

Media relations are a two-sided coin. If you handle it well, the result will be good coverage. If you handle it with difficulty, usually there is no second opportunity.

Remember...**There are no ‘off the record’ comments.** Anything that is said to a reporter may be used in his/her story.

Diocesan Policy

Who are the Spokespersons?

The Bishop is the official spokesperson for the Diocese. The Bishop may appoint others, in addition to himself, to speak on a specific issue or related to crisis or disaster management.

Useful traits for a spokesperson include:

- Articulate
- Good listener
- Have camera presence
- Be well-informed about the issue
- Able to think quickly on his or her feet
- Have credibility
- Be able to develop a good rapport with the reporter
- Be intuitive enough to know when the reporter is not friendly

When can a Parish Priest / or parish spokes person speak to the media?

If the issue is a local parish matter, such as publicity for a special event, or project being undertaken by a parish, the Priest or his/her designate is authorized to speak to the media. ***However, if the local matter has implications for the wider constituency, the Priest shall not speak to the media but should contact the Bishop and advise of the circumstances.***

What Steps to Take When a Reporter Calls

Write down the name of the reporter, media outlet, phone number as well as their initial question(s). Ask what their deadline is to file their story.

Prior to starting to answer the question (s) or letting a camera into the site – ***first consider if you should do the interview or if someone else e.g., Bishop, lawyer, warden or committee chairperson should be responding.***

If someone else should be responding – ask the reporter if you can get back to them with the phone number of the correct person for them to interview. ***Contact the “specialist” first and fully brief them.*** Then return the call in a timely manner to the reporter and give him or her the spokesperson’s name and phone number.

Photography and Filming

Always notify parishioners that they are going to be (or might be) photographed or filmed – before it happens. Parishioners and staff who do not wish to be photographed or filmed should not be.

You need to have written permission from the parent(s) or guardian for a media outlet to photograph or film children, and you should keep the permission on file.

Issues Management

For issues that have become “news worthy” the Bishop will speak to the Media, or appoint a spokesperson to communicate with the media.

The Diocese or a parish or a committee may have identified or already be monitoring a possible serious issue. Do not assume that it will go away or not be noticed or heard about in the wider community, including the media. *The early detection should be identified to the Parish Corporation/Council and the Diocese. Possible draft messages for the media should be prepared as part of the action plan.*

Guidelines and Advice for Parishes Conversing with the Media

If the issue is a local parish matter, such as publicity for a special event, or project being undertaken by a parish, the Priest or his/her designate is authorized to speak to the media.

If you are being interviewed, remember that you can

- answer a question with a question to shift over to your message
- set the ground rules (length, time of the interview)
- if there is something you do not wish to discuss, say so
- if it is a negative question, give a short answer and bridge to your message

Points to Remember:

- o Keep your messages or replies simple.
- o Do not use Anglican jargon.
- o Use full names for programs.
- o Beware of humor – it can come across as insensitive, and remember some people (the public reading the article) may not have a sense of humor, or understand that it was meant in jest.
- o Beware of appearing “overcontrolling.”

Watch for and be aware of.....

The loaded preface

“Your parish has slipped to almost no members, the Aboriginal persons in the neighborhood feel unwelcome, the gays are not allowed to take Communion and the single mothers are going to boycott you for breaking the lease with their daycare in your church hall. How can you expect to survive?”

The either/or question

“Your Diocese seems ready to close. Is this due to the Residential Schools Settlement being a financial strain or the number of clergy and volunteers who are sexually abusing youth?”

The Silent Pause

... you are proud of what you just said to the reporter and then he or she is silent. You had finished saying “We are proud of our new work with the refugees and they have started their own service with a retired bishop.” Silence... and you feel compelled to go on to say “As Anglicans we have never done very well accepting new Canadian into our congregation as many of our people have difficulty accepting cultures different from their own.”

After you have been interviewed, take a few minutes to write a memo to file, giving the reporter, media outlet, time and date of the interview, the questions and your answers, and who or what was photographed or filmed. If you feel that the interview focused on an issue – provide a copy to the wardens or board/committee and fax a copy to the Bishop at the Diocesan Office.

Privacy

Advice and guidance should be sought from the Diocese for:

- Adding photos of children to a parish website
- Providing names, phone numbers and E-mail addresses of parishioners
- The inclusion of children in media photos and filming

Prior to a reporter coming into the parish office or your office, consider what may be on desks, computer screens, and bulletin boards

What Should One Wear for an Interview?

If one is clergy – reflect that you are clergy by your attire. Clergy (and non-clergy) also could wear a light blue shirt or blouse and a blue or gray suit or a blazer.

Coaching By Phone or In Person

The Diocesan Office can arrange for you to contact a media specialist or a clergy mentor used to dealing with the media - if you feel that you would like some advice and guidance prior to speaking to the media. They also can assist in drafting and prioritizing messages and identifying photo or filming opportunities.

Be prepared in advance with the following general information:

- What is our mission?
- Who are our parishioners?
- What do they value?
- What are our results?
- Who else is involved?
- What is the plan for the issue, crisis, disaster, concern, event, activity, etc.?
- Who did we consult?
- Who will it affect, help, heal or reach?
- Why have we had to reach this decision?
- When will the decision take effect?
- Why I cannot comment?

Additional thought on the messages

Think carefully about which message(s) you wish to give to the media. You will want to define for yourself if the message(s) are theological, sociological or ethical interpretations of an issue or concern. And consider how your message will affect your parish-community relations (children in a day care in the parish hall, a tot lot next to the church, parking, a family business, group home, safe house, rezoning, etc.).

An Interesting Visual Backdrop

A picture can be worth a thousand words. You can use a symbol e.g., the Cross – but consider the focus and context of the story from the media’s point of view – or how the symbol will be used?

Press/Media Releases

Parishes and committees may wish to send out a 2-3 paragraph media release about something that is new or special. It should be on letterhead and have a name and contact number of the spokesperson. *Please fax a courtesy copy to the Diocese.*

Public Service Announcements (PSAs)

Some parishes and committees have discovered the Public Service Announcement or Community News columns. They should be less than 25 words and have a contact phone number.

The Website

If a reporter checked your website – what image would he or she have and what insight would be gained?

The Negative Story

First allow for a short cooling off period. Then consider the following responses:

1. No response.
2. A letter to the writer of the story.
3. A letter to the editor, not for publication.
4. A letter to the editor, for publication.
5. A counter interview with another media outlet (element of risk).
6. A formal demand for a published correction.
7. A lawsuit.

Letters to the Editor are of interest to the newspaper reader because they reflect public opinion. It is a form of public forum. Most letters come from private citizens about public issues.

It is suggested for any letters, that there be a 24 hour cooling off period before sending one – and contact the Diocese for advice and guidance. A letter should be fewer than 200 words and only cite 2-3 errors with the correction and sent as soon as possible after an erroneous story.

Prior to entering into #6 and #7, contact the Diocese regarding advice and guidance.

Keeping Bad News from becoming a Crisis

Shocks and surprises can result in negative coverage. They also can result in the image of appearing uncaring and insensitive. Media announcements and holding a press conference can assist a situation. It is better to talk to the media early than waiting and having to be reactive. *Contact the Diocese first.*