I. Crisis Communication at Phillips Theological Seminary

A. Introduction

The goal of this crisis communication plan (based upon a plan used at the University of Louisville) is to prepare the seminary community to present itself in the best light possible during a crisis. The way Phillips responds and communicates in a crisis could have an ongoing effect on the school’s reputation for an extended period of time.

While Phillips is a private institution and has a different level of responsibility for informing the public of its activities than does a public institution, responding in a clear and transparent way should serve to increase public trust in the school. Responding to news reports in the general media is a primary role of crisis communication. Leading that process through pre-emptive messaging is a critical aspect of managing the crisis.

For purposes of this plan, a crisis is defined as: A significant disturbance in the seminary’s activities which results in extensive news coverage and public scrutiny, and which has the potential to cause long-term public relations damage.

The actions Phillips takes in crises, and how it interacts with the news media during these periods of intense public scrutiny, can critically shape public perception, which in turn can affect the degree of support it receives, the morale of its employees and trustees, and the number of students who attend.

This plan addresses crisis communication on two levels by offering:
- Policies aimed at gaining control of reputation problems before they become public relations crises.
- Standard procedures for limiting damage in crises that cannot be avoided.

A Crisis Action Checklist (based on the University of Louisville model) outlines the basic approach to crisis management. It was prepared for use as a reference for all Phillips personnel who at some point may be involved in a crisis.

B. Pre-emptive vs. Reactive Crisis Management

Adopting a pre-emptive approach to media relations is critical in successful crisis management.

The policies and procedures in this plan are based on disclosure as a preferred strategy for managing crises.

C. General Assumptions
• Phillips Theological Seminary is located in Tulsa, where the television stations and newspaper serving the region are located. This could result in a higher degree of media scrutiny and wider release of news.
• Public sentiment is growing for more accountability in higher education institutions, and news coverage has become more investigative. Religious institutions are also facing greater scrutiny. The seminary's stance on issues of social justice increases the likelihood of scrutiny.
• Public perceptions are a key factor in the support the seminary receives from congregations, alumni/ae, donors and the community. These perceptions also influence the ability to attract and retain qualified trustees, students, faculty and staff.
• Negative news coverage can damage the reputation of Phillips.
• Although crises can pose a threat to the seminary's public image, they also present an opportunity for communicating a desired message.
• Phillips can safeguard its reputation by adopting an active, effective approach to crisis communication.

D. Crisis Communication Policy

1. General policy

Phillips Theological Seminary is committed to taking a pre-emptive approach to public relations crises, using disclosure whenever possible as the preferred strategy for preventing or minimizing public relations crises.

No one is authorized to speak to the news media in a crisis without clearance from the Office of the President or appointed designee.

The seminary relations office will be responsible for developing crisis communication strategies.

Final approval of these strategies will rest with the seminary president or appointed designee.

2. Crisis prevention

The seminary relations office will maintain regular contact with vice presidents, associate deans, directors, department heads, and faculty, staff and student leaders, advising the appropriate administrator(s) when internal issues or developments appear likely to lead to public relations problems. The president will maintain regular contact with trustees.

Similarly, the seminary's administration will regularly notify the seminary relations office of internal developments that may escalate into public relations crises.

The seminary relations office also will monitor local, state and national news coverage of religious issues and theological education, advising the appropriate administrator(s) of issues and/or trends that might lead to negative stories.
3. **Crisis response**

When crises erupt, the seminary relations office, working with the president’s office, will gather and verify information about the crisis, assess the severity of the crisis, and develop strategies concerning how information is to be released, who should speak for the institution and who is to be notified.

The seminary relations office also will confer with others, as appropriate, to work out logistical details of releasing information, and distribute verified information as quickly as possible to internal and external audiences. If there is an immediate need to deliver information to students, staff and faculty, that information should be considered in the public arena. The seminary should consider using a mass notification system for alerting its internal audiences to a sudden crisis.
Crisis Communication Procedure

I. Foreseeable crises

A. Crisis assessment: Senior Director of Seminary Relations Kurt Gwartney will be notified immediately of an emerging crisis (405-943-7862 or 918-895-9545)

1. Gwartney will confer with President Gary Peluso-Verdend and others as appropriate to assess the nature and severity of the crisis

2. Gwartney may be able to devise a simple strategy to forestall the crisis, particularly if it is confined to a single or small scale event

3. If issues and events are of sufficient complexity that a simple strategy is not likely to be effective, Gwartney will recommend to President Gary Peluso-Verdend that the seminary quickly form a crisis team OR if the president is not immediately available, OR incapacitated, recommend to the vice presidents a crisis team be quickly formed

B. Peluso-Verdend (or designee) will assemble and chair a crisis team made up of the highest-ranking officials of the seminary involved in the crisis.

1. The composition of the team will vary according to the situation.

2. The crisis team will convene in the Board Room unless another meeting location is specified. If the crisis means meeting at the seminary is not possible, the team will convene at Faith United Methodist Church.

3. At the session, Gwartney will:
   a) Gather as many details as possible
   b) Recommend strategies for internal and external communication
   c) Select an appropriate spokesperson (see seminary spokesperson)
   d) Final approval of the recommendations by Gwartney will rest with Peluso-Verdend (or designee).

II. Sudden crises

A. When the sudden occurrence of a severe crisis precludes convening a crisis team, the following emergency procedures will take effect:

1. Peluso-Verdend will:
   a) Be notified immediately of the crisis
   b) Be apprised of all known facts/background
c) Work with Gwartney or his designee to develop a "first-wave" communication strategy

2. Seminary relations staff will implement the strategy immediately upon approval by Peluso-Verdend or his designee.

B. After implementing "first-wave" communication strategy, Gwartney will assist in forming a crisis team to develop ongoing strategy. If the president's office is incapacitated, the dean shall be the designee.

III. Establishing a clear line of communication

A. Seminary Relations will be authorized to gather and verify information in a crisis, and will be the only department authorized to release information.

1. A representative of the seminary unit directly related to the crisis will quickly supply Seminary Relations with all known details.

2. All news media contacts will be directed to Seminary Relations.

IV. Releasing information internally

A. Seminary Relations will attempt to inform staff, faculty and students of crises before details are released externally. This may not be practical in all situations.

1. Seminary Relations may:

   a) Notify seminary students, faculty and staff by telephone, text, personal contact, email or other means.

   b) Issue news bulletins on the seminary's Internet homepage.

   c) Distribute informational flyers.

   d) Set up a telephone hotline.

V. Informing outside parties

A. Seminary Relations will coordinate notification of outside parties likely to be affected by or strongly interested in the crisis.

1. Whenever practical, attempts will be made to:

   a) Inform affected parties of impending media calls.

   b) Supply them with written information before it is distributed to the news media.

   c) Notify them of any planned news briefings.
2. Seminary officials with the closest working relationships to the outside parties should handle actual notification. Seminary Relations may be designated to perform this role if necessary.

VI. Releasing information to the news media

A. Seminary Relations will work to supply verifiable details to the news media as rapidly as possible.

1. This may be done through personal contact, electronic means or formal news briefing.
   
   a) *It may become necessary to schedule periodic news briefings.*
   
   b) *All media contacts will be logged.*

B. After releasing information, Seminary Relations will monitor the news coverage, including news websites and social media, quickly correcting any errors that are made.

VII. Evaluation and follow-up

A. Seminary Relations will document the news coverage surrounding a crisis, including online, wire stories, newspaper articles, radio and television broadcasts.

B. When the crisis is past, Seminary Relations will supply the crisis team with a summary of news coverage.

1. Members of the team will review this report and evaluate the seminary’s performance. The team will note:

   a) *Overall success or failure of the crisis communication effort*

   b) *Problems to be avoided in the future*

   c) *Appropriate follow-up measures*

2. Seminary Relations will report the findings of the team to the President's Office.