

## 1 THE NEED FOR A CRISIS PLAN

As the church van made new tracks down the quiet road in the glistening snow, the students' voices rang through the night with the praise songs "Shout to the Lord" and "Awesome God," sounds to put a smile on the face of God. The youth group slowly made its way home from the retreat on a spiritual high that would last forever—or so they thought.

The words crashed to a dead silence as the van began to tailspin and slide toward a ravine. A tire clipped the curb and tipped the van into a roll. Crunching glass flew, and the sound of twisting metal pierced the night air as the vehicle rolled and rolled down the ravine, finally landing upright in the snow. The blaring horn aroused Jesse from his daze.

"Seth, are you OK?" Jesse shouted, unbuckling his seatbelt and reaching over to pull Seth off the steering wheel. No response. "Oh, no—the other van doesn't know!" Jesse said, gasping. "Are you guys OK?" Jesse yelled to the six middle-schoolers in the van. Amid groans and whines, he saw slight movements among the six.

Jesse pulled out his cell phone to call people in the other van. Nothing—no reception. Just then headlights blinded Jesse as a truck pulled up next to them.

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“Dr. Atkinson, Johnny was just jumped outside by some kids from Westside High!” Cindy screamed as she ran into the office. “They bashed his head in, and he’s bleeding all over!”

“I brought my kid to this Christian school to get away from these problems,” a mother waiting in the office declared. Several office staff ducked into other offices to spread the word.

“Where is he, Cindy?” Dr. Atkinson said as he ran with her out of the office. They sprinted across the street to Johnny’s side as he lay unconscious in the gutter next to his car. Hysterically, Cindy chatted endlessly as Dr. Atkinson tried to help Johnny.

Students streamed from the school after they heard the sirens of the emergency vehicles rushing to the scene. Three students dashed across the street. An ambulance veered to miss them as it careened around the corner. People in neighboring homes stared from their front yards. Mothers from down the block wheeled their babies in strollers to see the commotion. Chaos ensued as teachers stood together talking while their students searched for friends—crying and hugging each other, fearing the worst.

## I Don't Think We're in Kansas Anymore

As Dorothy said to Toto, “I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore.” Today we’ve learned that working with young people is not simply fun and games while trying to instill good morals and behavior in them. We can’t continue in youth work as we always have in the past. Life happens, and the harsh reality of our world today means we’re not immune to difficulties the rest of the world faces. It is not a question of *if* a tragedy will strike under our watch but *when*.

As leaders working with youth, we’re responsible to do all we can to be as fully prepared as possible. We must take advantage of every opportunity to equip ourselves to be as competent as possible in our positions. No one can use the excuse anymore that he or she didn’t know a crisis plan was needed. The chance of a tragedy of Columbine High School magnitude is unlikely, but there are many other types of situations that can have a crippling effect on your young people.

Situations similar to the ones mentioned can happen at any time. In those examples a crisis plan was not in place, so immediately many things transpired that heightened the severity of the crises. For example, in the first situation with the youth group traveling home from a winter retreat, one of the first things their crisis plan should have mandated was for the two vans to travel close enough to be always visible to each other. That would not have stopped what happened, but it would have prevented many of the ensuing problems. The other van carried able-bodied people who could call 911, flag down other vehicles on the road, help with the injured, and so on.

In the crisis at the Christian school, a crisis plan would have assigned jobs to everyone and curtailed the chaos that resulted. Upon hearing the news, the office staff would have immediately focused its attention on individual responsibilities assigned within the plan. That would have created an orderly response to the crisis at hand while de-escalating the fear of the staff, parents, and students.

Problems can also arise when we don't adhere to the crisis plan we have or when we get lax in carrying it out. An example of not carrying out the plan recently occurred at a school in Missouri where several deaths occurred throughout the year. At the end of the year another student died. The administration was so weary from the other crises that they simply decided not to acknowledge the death by making an announcement to the students or by sending a letter home, simply thinking it would be too much for the students to handle.

They thought wrong. Instead, school administrators faced an onslaught of accusations from the community of incompetence, insensitivity, and even prejudice. So in the aftermath of the death, rather than dealing with a grieving student body, staff, and community, the leaders also had to deal with the backlash of the accusations. We all know what a litigious society we live in. This is an enormous issue when it comes to crisis response, and having a well-planned crisis response can prevent a lot of headaches. We list some important resources for you in the "Recommended Resources" section in the back of the book.

## Selection of Crisis Team Members

The selection and placement of crisis team members may be the most important decisions you'll make in your leadership position. If all team members understand their roles on the team, there will be less chance of someone usurping the main leader's authority. All phases of the crisis response will be covered, because all team members are accountable for carrying out their own areas of responsibility. Team members must be committed to supporting, backing up, confronting, and covering for each other. That's why the selection of people on the team is crucial to its effectiveness.

It's recommended to have two people who hold the same staff positions serving on the crisis team or serving as backup. If one becomes ineffective or unable to perform his or her responsibilities, then the other team member can fill the gap. All crisis team members must be somewhat familiar with the responsibilities of the other members. With each crisis, certain positions will have added responsibility or pressure, and those people may need extra help or backup. The functioning of the crisis team will depend on the crisis. There should be a minimum of ten people on the team, not including backups. We'll discuss this later in the chapter.

Often outside the regular workday, a church or school will be notified of a crisis involving one of its young people. In that case the crisis team may be asked to meet as soon as possible or early the next morning. This will give the team time to think through its response and make plans accordingly. At other times when a crisis occurs, immediate re-

sponse is needed before the crisis team can meet. Steps are taken at a moment's notice, and decisions are made as the crisis unfolds. Usually in these cases the crisis team won't be able to meet until later in the day.

Crisis team members must be people who are respected in their assigned positions as well as able to think quickly on their feet. They must be team players who will advocate for the best interests of the youth group or school. They must be able to uphold confidentiality. Their faith and dependence on God must be evident, because they may get into situations in which they're at their wits' end and will need to depend on God alone for strength and wisdom in dire circumstances. Team members should also have good communication skills to effectively deliver information to all parties during a crisis. One requirement for all crisis team members is to be certified in CPR and have first-aid training.

Crisis teams will look a little different for youth groups than they do for schools. There are many similarities, but there are also some noticeable differences. We've named positions with titles that can be used for both churches and schools. We'll discuss youth group crisis teams first.

## Youth Group Crisis Teams

**Youth Director.** Since the youth group is part of a larger church, there are probably leaders who hold a higher position in the church than the youth director. (We'll use the term "youth director" to represent all those in this position, which would include youth directors, youth pastors, and so on.)

Discussion between the senior pastor, the youth director, and others who hold lay leadership positions with the church, such as elders, deacons, board members, and so on, is necessary to decide who will be the point person on the crisis team as it pertains to the youth group. Typically this is the youth director, since there will be many times the youth group is away from the church when a crisis occurs. The church should have a crisis team for the church as a whole, which the senior pastor/official will typically head. So it follows that the youth director will be in charge of the youth group crisis team.

**Church Leaders.** Two church leaders should also be on the youth group crisis team. This might be associate pastors, elders, deacons, board members, or other leaders within the church depending on its size. These leaders will support the youth director with needed resources and will communicate with others in leadership what's needed during the crisis. These leaders will fill specific roles, which we'll discuss in the next chapter.

**Youth Workers/Volunteers.** All other adults who are on the youth group staff should be on the crisis team. If you have a large youth group with many volunteers, it may not be necessary to have all volunteers on the crisis team, but they need to be made aware of the crisis plan so they can be backups for crisis team members.

**Secretary.** If you have a large youth group with a secretary on the youth staff, he or she should be on the crisis team. If you don't have a secretary, then someone needs to be

designated as the recorder of all information and documentation. That person should have a backup who can cover in the secretary's absence and understand the workings of the crisis team. There should also be a filing system established for crisis forms and materials that is accessible and easy to understand for anyone needing information quickly.

**Parents.** Two parents should be on the crisis team in an auxiliary role. These should be parents of students who are active and well respected in the youth group. They should be supporters of youth group activities and active in the church themselves. These parents should be from different families instead of a couple from one family. They can be married or single. It would help if they have some experience in crisis intervention personally or through their jobs, but it's not necessary. These parents must be highly respected among the parents of the students in the youth group.

**Student Leaders.** Two students should be on the crisis team in an auxiliary role. These should be students in the oldest grade the youth group covers (for example, 12th-graders in a high school youth group). They must have good character and be as mature as can reasonably be expected in that age-group. They should be students who have proved to be dependable and trustworthy and who will uphold the strictest confidentiality. They should be respected by peers and adults alike and be positive role models for all students in the youth group.

**Other Possible Crisis Team Members.** You may want other members on the team, which will depend on the size of



the youth group and community, the number of schools your youth group members represent, and so on. If teachers or staff members at schools within your community attend your church, you may want to invite them to be on the team. They may have valuable input on how to work with the schools in your area in case of a crisis. If your church has someone who works in the emergency or medical profession, it may be beneficial to have that person on the crisis team or to use him or her as a consultant if possible. Other positions may be added depending on the needs of your group.

## Christian School Crisis Teams

**Principal.** The principal will lead the crisis team and will facilitate the crisis team meetings and guide the activation of the crisis plan. This is the point person throughout the crisis. Once informed of the crisis, the principal confers with the key people in determining the initial stages of the response—collecting and confirming details of the crisis, notifying and gathering the crisis team, and so on. Other responsibilities of the principal will be discussed in greater detail in the second chapter.

**Other Administrators.** Crisis team members are determined by the size of the school. It's good to have all school administrators on the team, but there may be times when the team must meet when some of the administrators are unable to attend. A backup leader must be designated in the event the principal is unavailable during the meetings. The backup leader or point person should be an administrator if possible.

**Counselors.** If the school has counselors or other mental health workers, there should be at least one on the crisis team—preferably two if the school has at least two on staff. These team members are valuable in assessing the mental health needs of the students, staff, and parents. They can coordinate efforts in the prevention, intervention, and “postvention” (after the crisis) stages. These crisis team members play key roles in helping the school recover in the aftermath of the crisis while helping the school return to normal functioning as soon as possible. If the school does not have counselors to fill both positions, then recruit a staff member who understands the mental health needs of young people.

**Teachers.** The two teachers on the crisis team must be well respected by other faculty and staff. They will be the voice for the teachers in monitoring the climate of the school and will be a direct link in determining student and faculty needs. They must be experienced teachers who understand teaching and the pressures inherent in the profession. They must be team players who can think clearly during stressful situations.

**Head Custodian.** The person in charge of maintenance for the school must also be on the crisis team. This person has valuable knowledge of the layout of the school, inherent hazards of the building, and where shutoffs of electricity, gas, water, and other utilities are located. This is crucial information for emergency service personnel who may be called to the school. If there is not another custodian to serve as back-up in this capacity, choose an administrator or another staff member with knowledge in these areas.

**Principal's Secretary.** It's important that the principal's secretary serve on the crisis team. He or she will be responsible for keeping detailed records of crisis team meetings and documentation of the crises. As with other positions, there must be a designated backup person who can fill in for the secretary, and this person must be kept up to date with all information regarding the crisis team, crisis plan, and so on. It may be necessary to include the backup person in all meetings. It's crucial to have a filing system that's easy to follow for anyone needing information in a time of crisis.

**Parents.** There's been debate regarding having parents on a school crisis team, because they may not be able to remain as neutral in crisis situations as school professionals when their children or children's friends could be involved in the emergency at hand. It may be best to have two parents serve in auxiliary roles—not attending crisis team meetings but serving in an advisory capacity. These parents can be the voice of the parents of the school and can offer input to crisis team members as the need arises. They can also be the spokespersons for the school/parent organization if the school has one.

**Students.** As with parents, it typically is not advisable to have students on the crisis team. Students typically do not possess the maturity to handle the stress of dealing with severe crisis. Choosing two students to serve in an auxiliary role would be the most effective way to get feedback as to the needs of the students.

**Other Possible Members.** Depending on the size of the

school, you may want to include other members. If you have a large school or are in the position to have security personnel, those persons should be on the crisis team. If your school is one of several schools in a district, you may have a designee from the district involved on the team. If your school has multiple levels (elementary, middle school, high school), you'll need to have each level represented, and it will depend on the team's preferences as to how many teachers you have on the team—one or two per level. The same goes for other members. Some schools have community medical or emergency personnel on the crisis team. This may not produce the best results, because often those individuals are not as immediately available as school personnel since they work off-site. It's good for key members of the crisis team to meet with community personnel in the prevention or "postvention" stage to include their input in the crisis plan. During a crisis, these people may be available and can advise at the scene of the emergency, but often they can't be readily available for a crisis team meeting. An auxiliary position may be recommended for these people too.

Again, the addition of other crisis team members will depend on the size of the school, size of the community, and the community resources available. In a small community, more members may need to be involved. These decisions must be made by the crisis team as a whole after considering the pros and cons of having extra people on the team.

As you can see, the selection of members for the crisis team takes a lot of consideration and forethought. This is the

first step in creating a crisis plan. The next step is to consider the types of crises the plan will address.

## Situations Your Crisis Plan Should Address

Countless crises are possible. Efforts should be made to address as many as possible in the crisis plan. Here we'll consider only a few. It will take time for your crisis team to think through the many possible scenarios your group may encounter, but following is a list to get you started:

- Vehicle emergencies away from the premises, such as accidents, running out of gas, flat tires, engine, or mechanical problems
- Injuries or illnesses while on trips
- Deaths on trips
- Fires in the building
- Lockdowns
- Earthquakes
- Tornadoes
- Floods
- Hazardous spills
- Blizzards
- Kidnappings on mission trips or class trips
- Travel emergencies, such as passport issues, accidents, missed flights, missing members
- Church or school shooting or violent intruder

These are some of the crises youth groups and schools potentially face. You'll want to start with the most likely crises that could occur with your group and list the steps needed to

respond to those crises. This process will take a lot of time. You probably already have plans in place for many of these scenarios. Begin compiling the information in an orderly fashion for your crisis manual. A sample format is shown in chapter three. For information on emergency situations you may not be familiar with, refer to the “Recommended Resources” section at the back of this book.

As you can see by all the crises listed in this chapter, a crisis plan should cover a multitude of situations. The selection of crisis team members is vital to the effectiveness of the plan, because each crisis will be different, and the members must be able to adapt to all possible scenarios. We have briefly discussed who should be on the crisis team, but now we will more thoroughly cover each member’s responsibilities.