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Los Angeles Archdiocese child sexual abuse scandal: A case study in crisis communication

Miranda Belinda Sagala

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LOS ANGELES ARCHDIOCESE CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE SCANDAL:

A CASE STUDY IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
Interdisciplinary Studies:
Integrated Marketing Communication

by
Miranda Belinda Sagala
September 2003
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ABSTRACT

This project examined strategies employed by the Los Angeles Archdiocese in communicating with the media during the initial phases of handling the child sexual abuse scandal. Review of professional literature yielded five generally accepted principles that should govern crisis communication: timeliness, openness, honesty, regret, and accessibility.

Internal and external messages from the archdiocese were analyzed in terms of how well they conformed to the five principles. Overall, the conclusion was that the archdiocese failed to meet all five criteria. In sum, these results show that, during this period, the archdiocese lost the public trust. The results are discussed, along with a few recommendations to public relations professionals and academicians regarding communication crises.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank my Heavenly Father for all the many blessings He has bestowed upon me. He has walked with me down troublesome paths and guided me through trials and tribulations that I never thought I'd see my way through. He gave me wisdom and understanding to make those tough decisions, which have helped me to become the person I am today. He is my refuge and strength, and I will continue to praise Him until His second coming.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my late grandmother, Susanna Tatuhey-Hetarihon, who taught me to live my life to the fullest. Her strength and beauty always inspire me. I also dedicate this project to all the victims of sexual abuse.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Project

The purpose of the project is to examine strategies employed by the Roman Catholic Los Angeles Archdiocese in communicating with the media during its crisis of child sexual abuse from late January 2002 to early June 2002. The study argues that the archdiocese’s crisis communication efforts failed because they violated five principles of effective crisis communication: 1) timeliness, 2) openness, 3) honesty, 4) regret, and 5) accessibility.

Description of the Project

The project consists of five chapters: 1) Introduction, which is an overview of the project; 2) Background of the Study, which describes the archdiocese’s strategies in communicating the scandal as a crisis in public relations, the background of the archdiocese and its child sexual abuse scandal, the archdiocese’s communication strategies in the crisis, public opinion on the archdiocese’s crisis communication, and the five-factor model of effective crisis communication which used to
analyze the crisis; 3) Methodology, which describes analytical procedures employed in the study to examine crisis communication strategy employed by the archdiocese in communicating with the media during the child sexual abuse scandal; 4) Analysis, which describes how the strategies employed by the archdiocese in communicating with the media during the crisis violated the five principles of effective crisis communication; and 5) Conclusions and Recommendations.

Significance of the Project

This project is a contribution to public relations practitioners and the academic community in the world of crisis communication. Practitioners will benefit from reading this project because its model of effective crisis communication can serve as a source of guidelines for communicating about future organizational crises with the media and the public. The academic community will benefit from this project because it applies this model of effective crisis communication to a scandal of major societal importance affecting hundreds of past and future sexual abuse victims, as well as millions remaining faithful to the Church's living institutions. More
directly, this communication crisis influenced the perceptions and judgments of the following stakeholders: media personnel, members of the Los Angeles Archdiocese, members of other Catholic dioceses worldwide, regional law enforcement and court officials, and businesses and non-governmental organizations allied with the Los Angeles Archdiocese.

This project suggests guidelines that public relations academicians can apply in analyzing how the model works in assessing organizational communication crises across the board.

Limitations of the Project

This project examined the communication strategies employed by the Los Angeles Archdiocese during its child sexual abuse crisis only from late January 2002 to early June 2002. This six-month time frame is considered by the author as the most reasonable; because, during this period, the archdiocese managed the crisis independently, with no guidance from other dioceses in the country or the Vatican. The archdiocese’s child sexual abuse issue is still ongoing even though the study ended in mid-June 2002. This study makes no claim that what was discovered in the time
reported here accurately characterizes the archdiocese’s current crisis communication strategies. It is worth speculating that a possible reason why this crisis is still ongoing rests with the failure of crisis communication strategy examined in the study.

Crisis communication by the archdiocese is unique because the organization is a non-profit, private, religious institution with a special relationship with its parishioners. That relationship is different from that of a profit corporation with its customers. The membership with the archdiocese is voluntary. Its major income comes from contributions by its parishioners and donors.

However, the Catholic Church is one of the biggest businesses going, not to mention one of the most political. Nationally, the Church takes in $8.2 billion a year in donations at the parish level, according to Joseph Harris, a researcher who is finishing the largest study to date on Catholic giving for the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University. Harris also says that the Catholic Church does tremendous amounts of good work with much of this money in the areas of housing, education, and human rights. The $8.2 billion in yearly revenue places the Catholic Church 234th on the Fortune 500 of U.S.
corporations. That total ranks the Church ahead of R.J. Reynolds Tobacco, Pepsi Bottling, John Hancock Financial Services, General Mills, Kellogg, America Online, Union Carbide, Campbell’s Soup, and Quaker Oats. There are, of course, other major Catholic-run institutions, such as universities and hospitals. Notre Dame, Boston College, and Georgetown, for example, have respective endowments of $3 billion, $1.045 billion, and $745 million (Jackson, 2002).

Although Harris found no historical evidence that the child abuse scandals in local parishes had affected revenues at the diocesan level, data from another large urban diocese shows a decline in donations. According to a poll conducted by Boston Globe in February 2002, nearly 20 percent of Boston-area Catholics said they had been giving less money to the Church since the scandals broke (Jackson, 2002). For an archdiocese that had just slashed its budget, that was not good news. If parishioners and donors stop contributing money during this period when archdioceses keep having to pay out millions of dollars in settlements, their future stability will be jeopardized.
CHAPTER TWO

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The Nature of Crisis Communication

Webster (1997) defines a crisis as "an unstable or uncertain time or state of affairs where the outcome of which will have a major impact."

According to Williams and Treadaway (1992), a crisis in public relations is encountered when the organization faces a situation which is closely observed by the media, and which interrupts normal business operations with potential monetary and credibility damage. Crisis communication constitutes the organization’s response to this situation in an effort to minimize damage to the organization’s image. Lerbinger (1986) notes:

A crisis is a public event, and the media inevitably converge on the scene. Management must cope not only with the crisis itself but also with the adjunct of public relations. A crisis strips an organization of its privacy and leaves it exposed to public scrutiny. (p. 83)

The Los Angeles Archdiocese’s child sexual abuse scandal reflects Williams and Treadaway’s (1992) criteria
of a crisis in public relations. The scandal caused close observation by the media, interrupted the archdiocese's normal business operations, and damaged the archdiocese's financial and positive public image.

About the Archdiocese

The Roman Catholic Los Angeles Archdiocese is the nation's largest archdiocese and comprises three counties in Southern California: Los Angeles, Ventura, and Santa Barbara (Winton & Shuster, 2002). The territory covers 8,762 square miles and extends from the northern county line of Santa Barbara County to the southern county line of Los Angeles with 3,595,414 faithfuls living among a total population of 10,330,409 (Archdiocese of Los Angeles, 2002).

The archdiocese is responsible for 284 parishes located in 120 cities in the three counties, nineteen missions and chapels, 230 elementary schools serving 70,750 students, and 53 high schools serving 31,170 students (Archdiocese of Los Angeles, 2002).
Background of Crisis

The Roman Catholic Church in the United States and Europe has been dogged for four decades by sporadic complaints of its priests' sexual abuse of children entrusted to their care. Legal challenges to the Church, once focused mainly on individual priests and dioceses, have increasingly targeted high Church officials for complicity in failing to protect children from sex abuse.

Above all, this analysis shows that the Church has lost the trust of the public. The high numbers of lawsuits filed by victims against the Church, along with high-cost settlements, have posed political, financial, moral, and image problems for the Church. The scandal has tested Catholics' faith in God and their Church, as distinct from their faith in the holiness, or even competence, of some of the Church's leaders. The scandal has also damaged not only the trust of Catholics but also of non-Catholics worldwide. The scandals and lawsuits have caused the Church to go through one of the biggest crises in its history.

The scandals gained national attention in early January 2002, as a result of news coverage about the Archdiocese of Boston was found to have known for years about, but failed to act against, a priest named John
Geoghan who had been accused of molesting 130 children over the last twenty years (Walker, 2002).

The archbishop of Boston then, Cardinal Bernard Law, was urged by Boston Catholics to resign for making decisions to continue to assign Geoghan and many other pedophile priests to parish work with access to children, despite his acknowledgment that these priests had previously molested children (Paulson, 2002).

The Cardinal did admit and did apologize that, in 1984, he had made the wrong decisions to keep Geoghan in parish work, but he refused to resign because the Vatican had not criticized him for his handling of the matter and had not asked him to resign—as any action against him could only be taken by the pope (Paulson, 2002). On December 13, 2002, the Cardinal finally resigned as archbishop of Boston admitting that he wished he could have stayed in his job but believed that his resignation was the best decision for the archdiocese (Belluck, 2002).

The Boston scandal led other dioceses in the country to open up about sex abuse. In Pennsylvania over the past half-century, 58 priests had faced credible accusations of abuse—some of the alleged abusers were now dead or retired. In Missouri, the Diocese of St. Louis removed two
priests who had been accused of abuse years ago, then released their names. The Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph acknowledged that it had paid $25,000 in 1996 to settle an abuse claim against a priest, but did not release his name. In Maine, the Diocese of Portland ordered two priests to announce their histories of sexual abuse to their parishes. The Diocese of Albany, New York, revealed it had quietly paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to settle child molestation cases against nine priests since 1977 (Zoll, 2002).

There were more than 80 priests accused of sexual misconduct with minors in Boston Archdiocese over the last four decades (Szaniszlo, 2002). Robertson and Kurkjian (2002) reported that the archdiocese, already in fiscal distress from years of spiraling costs, faced the prospect of paying more than $40 million to settle 140 pending sexual molestation claims against priests and tens of millions of dollars beyond that to settle new claims.

Description of Crisis

The scandal shifted focus from Boston to Los Angeles in the last weekend of January 2002, when a sex abuse lawsuit that was filed against the archbishop of Los
Angeles, Cardinal Roger Mahony, gained media attention (Lopez, 2002).

Mahony was sued by a victim who said that, as the head of the Los Angeles Archdiocese, he knew of several instances of molestation at St. John’s Seminary in the 1980s and failed to call the police or help the victims (Lopez, 2002). Mahony was also accused of protecting pedophile priests by assigning them to parish work with access to children, despite knowing of their misconduct (Gumbel, 2002). Mahony, as it turned out, did not have to take a stand in this case. This case was settled within days of Mahony’s summons. Mahony made no public announcement on the case and its settlement, and he refused to answer questions from the media and the public (Lopez, 2002).

About a month later, on February 21, Mahony responded by writing a pastoral statement entitled “I Will Appoint Over You Shepherds After My Own Heart,” which was published in the archdiocese’s newspaper The Tidings, in the archdiocese’s Spanish newspaper Vida Nueva, and on the archdiocese’s website www.la-archdiocese.org/english (Winton & Stammer, 2002; Mahony, 2002).
In the pastoral statement, Mahony reiterated the archdiocese’s Zero Tolerance policy that he had issued in 1988 after two years of being the archbishop of Los Angeles. The policy stated that “the Archdiocese of Los Angeles will never deal with a problem of sexual abuse on the part of a priest or deacon by simply moving him to another ministerial assignment” (Los Angeles Times Staff and Wire Reports Metro Desk, 2002). In complying with the policy, Mahony wrote: “the archdiocese will not knowingly assign or retain a priest, deacon, religious or layperson to serve in its parishes, schools, pastoral ministries, or any other assignment when such an individual is determined to have previously engaged in sexual abuse of a minor” (Stammer & Lobdell, 2002). Mahony also wrote that he agreed to continue to abide by the California Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act that mandated each person worked for the archdiocese to report any reasonable suspicion of child abuse to local police or to child protective services (Mahony, 2002).

Approximately a week after publishing the pastoral statement, on March 4, the media bombarded the archdiocese for trying to cover-up the scandal by not revealing the
names and numbers of alleged pedophile priests that Mahony had recently dismissed (Stammer & Lobdell, 2002).

Sources familiar with the dismissals told the Los Angeles Times reporters Stammer and Lobdell (2002) that, for the past two weeks Mahony had directed "six to 12" Los Angeles Archdiocese priests who were involved in past sexual abuse cases to retire or otherwise leave their ministries. None of these priests were believed to be involved in any recent cases, and all of them had received psychological counseling. Of these targeted priests, those who were 62 or older were asked to retire; younger priests were told that their status as priests was now inactive; those who resided in either a parish rectory or other church facility were asked to move out; and all of them were also asked to consider leaving the priesthood entirely.

The dismissals caused many critics in the Los Angeles community to complain about why these Los Angeles priests being asked to leave only now, since the archdiocese had begun instituting its Zero Tolerance policy since 1988. The critics said Mahony should have fired the pedophile priests years ago instead of moving them from parish to parish with access to children (Stammer & Lobdell, 2002).
Mahony declined to publicly discuss the dismissals, and other archdiocese officials were also unwilling to comment on whether the archdiocese had reported those abuse cases to law enforcement authorities. Mahony’s spokesman and media relations director, Tod Tamberg, told the media on that same day, March 4, as the media’s attack regarding the covered up dismissals that Mahony stood by his February 21 pastoral statement agreeing to abide the California Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act. Tamberg said Mahony was committed to obeying the law and protecting the children of the archdiocese (Winton & Stammer, 2002).

On that same day, March 4, Los Angeles Police Department, Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, as well as sheriff’s departments in Ventura and Santa Barbara told the media that the archdiocese had not given them the names of the dismissed priests. Los Angeles County District Attorney Steve Cooley said that, under the penal code, citizens had a duty to report within 36 hours any specific incident of molestation, and failure to report such crimes was a misdemeanor (Winton & Stammer, 2002).

According to the archdiocese’s attorney, John McNicholas, the archdiocese’s officials had received six child molestation complaints in the last five years,
including two current allegations and four involving adults complaining of past misconduct. “Overall, there were about 50 cases of sexual misbehavior reported to the archdiocese in the last five years” (Winton & Stammer, 2002).

Four days later, on March 8, Mahony responded to media and other critics in an informational brochure on sex abuse entitled “Respecting the Boundaries: Keeping Ministerial Relationships Healthy and Holy.” The brochure was sent to all parishes and schools in the Los Angeles Archdiocese, was posted on the archdiocese’s website, and was printed in the front page of The Tidings (Watanabe, 2002).

The brochure was written in a question-and-answer format, answering such questions as the nature of sexual abuse, factors that might lead to it, how to prevent it, and how the archdiocese handled complaints against clergy. It defined sexual abuse as a behavior that can range from intercourse to an “inappropriate gift,” such as lingerie, or a prolonged hug when a brief one would be appropriate (Archdiocese of Los Angeles, 2002).

The brochure stated that the archdiocese would respond to all allegations of abuse promptly with a team of investigators, comply with laws requiring that alleged abuse be brought to the attention of law enforcement
agencies, offer psychological and spiritual counseling to families and victims, and seek to deal as openly as possible with the parish community over the charges. The brochure also provided a hotline number for reporting suspected sexual misconduct or child abuse within the Los Angeles Archdiocese institutions and ministries only (Watanabe, 2002).

However, the brochure was not a voluntary action by the archdiocese. The brochure and hotline were two of 11 items required by the Superior Court as results of a $5.2 million lawsuit resolved in August 2001 that involved the Orange Diocese, Los Angeles Archdiocese and an alleged victim who had been molested twice by a priest in 1991 (Stammer, Pasco, & Lobdell, 2001).

A week after distributing the brochure, on March 15, Mahony ordered all priests in the archdiocese public ministry to attend a two-weeks workshop at St. Agatha Church in southwest Los Angeles. The workshop reviewed the archdiocese’s sexual abuse policies, offered advice on how to maintain a healthy relationship in the ministry, and instructed priests on legal reporting requirements for suspected child abuse. Priests were also asked to sign a statement saying they had received a copy of the sex abuse
policies (Watanabe, 2002). Again, the signed statements had been required by the August 2001 $5.2 million settlement (Stammer, Pasco, & Lobdell, 2001).

For many of the priests, the workshop provided the first time to gather and share their feelings since allegations of widespread abuse in the Boston Archdiocese fanned the issue of child sexual abuse by clergy into a national firestorm. During a question-and-answer period, priests raised several concerns, including whether to hug a child on a playground, keep confessions confidential, and whether innocent priests would be duly protected with legal representation (Watanabe, 2002).

A week later, on March 22, Mahony finally publicly confirmed in The Tidings that he had dismissed a few pedophile priests accused of past sexual abuse, but he did not say precisely how many clerics were involved. Nor did he say when the reported abuses occurred, where the priests had served, or when the archdiocese first learned of the allegations. He said: “only that virtually all of the cases cited in the media were old, having occurred as long as decades ago” (Winton & Stammer, 2002).

After publicly confirming the dismissals, Mahony received a telephone call from Fresno Bishop John
Steinbock, who told Mahony that a Fresno woman named Flora Mae Hickman had accused Mahony molesting her in 1970 when she was a high school student. On that same day, March 22, Mahony reported the allegation to the Los Angeles Police Department and said that he welcomed the Fresno Police Department to call him anytime for a telephone interview. Mahony said that the Fresno Police could tape-record the interview, and also that he did not need an attorney on the line; since he had no recollection of ever meeting Miss Hickman. Mahony made no public announcement about the accusation. He issued only a written statement denying the allegation to the Los Angeles Police Department, which did not pass along to the media (Stammer & Arax, 2002).

On March 24, Mahony was confronted by protesters, consisting of victims and their supporters, outside a Palm Sunday service at St. Mary Magdalen Church in Camarillo, Ventura County. According to protesters, Mahony had ignored the sex abuse problem for too long and had not been forthcoming enough. They were armed with banners and leaflets calling on the archdiocese to release the names of the recently dismissed priests. They asked for victims to be released from settlement agreements binding them to confidentiality, so that they could speak out about their
abusers. They also asked parishioners to stop contributing money until the archdiocese became more forthcoming with information (Winton & Hanley, 2002).

That day, Mahony made no public statement and refused to answer questions. But Tod Tamberg repeated his previous statement that the archdiocese was fully cooperating with law enforcement, and that every member of the clergy in the archdiocese was now complying with the California Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act (Winton & Hanley, 2002).

Two days later, on March 26, Mahony conducted a meeting with 300 Los Angeles Archdiocese priests at Our Lady of Refuge Church in Long Beach and addressed the issue of victims' confidentiality agreements. Mahony said he would support victims of long-ago sexual abuse who wanted to break confidentiality agreements and talk, but he would not release the names of their abusers. He cautioned that identifying priests involved in older cases could traumatize their victims again, and he said that he accepted full responsibility for "the sins in the past." Mahony also said that the subject of marriage in the priesthood should be open to discussion. He made it clear, however, that he saw no correlation between the Church’s
current mandate celibacy and child abuse. Sexual abusers, he said, were often married men (Winton & Stammer, 2002).

After resisting person-to-person contact with the media for two full months, Stammer (2002) reported that, Mahony finally agreed to conduct a media interview on April 2. Mahony conducted the interview to explain why he had declined earlier to reveal to the media and the public the names and exact number of the dismissed priests. Mahony acknowledged that it may have appear he was protecting the priests and not the victims, but he said that two victims in the old cases had pleaded with him not to release the names of the abusing priests because the records would also show their names as well. In one case, a man had told Mahony the disclosure that he had been sexually abused as a boy would threaten his marriage. In another case, a man who had been abused told Mahony he had managed to avoid answering an employment question about any history of abuse. If it had come out that he had been abused as a youth, he could lose his job.

Mahony said he had no objection if victims wanted to disclose the names of their priest offenders, but he contended he had been convinced by the archdiocese’s attorneys that it would not be practical to name a specific
number of dismissals because several reviews of old cases were now in process.

Mahony made it clear that none of the dismissed priests were currently involved in any ministries involving children or youths. There were only two current sex abuse cases in the archdiocese, he said. One had been reported in 2001 and involved a permanent deacon. Another, involved the abuse of youths in an Azusa church, and had been recently phoned in to the archdiocese’s hotline.

Mahony said most of the dismissed priests were already retired. Some were living outside the archdiocese. But he said he had taken action against them because they received pensions from the Los Angeles Archdiocese and remained canonically attached as priests to the archdiocese. Some dismissals had been delayed until February, he said, to make sure the priests had a supportive environment.

Mahony also said most of the priests agreed that the archdiocese had to dismiss them, although it was difficult for some of the men because they had had a clean record since their cases had been disposed of by the criminal justice system. Mahony made it clear that the issue had nothing to do with homosexuality, heterosexuality or with
celibacy. He said it was a problem of "sexual maturation" on the part of the priest.

Mahony added that the current cases of priestly abuse were handled openly and "there was no hesitancy" to inform a parish when "the circumstances warranted it." The archdiocese, he said, was fully in compliance with the California Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act. He ended the interview by stating that his top priorities were to protect children and young people and to reach out to victims in the best way he could.

A Couple of days later, on April 4, Calvo (2002) reported that some of the archdiocese's internal e-mails had been leaked to KFI-AM 640, a radio station in Los Angeles. The radio talk show hosts, John Kobylt and Ken Chiampou, then read the e-mails on the air.

The leaked e-mails, dated March 13 to April 3, 2002, revealed dialogues between Los Angeles Archdiocese officials and attorneys as they struggled to contain child molestation allegations against priests--allegations such as transferring a pedophile priest to another parish. In a panic, Mahony told a fellow clergyman that, out of the eight priests involved in past sexual abuse cases that he had recently dismissed, the archdiocese had only reported
five of them to the Los Angeles Police Department (Archdiocese of Los Angeles, 2002).

In the middle of reading, Calvo (2002) reported, the radio hosts were stopped by an attorney for the archdiocese who called to say that the archdiocese had obtained a cease-and-desist order from the Superior Court. The two hosts pulled back. But after a Superior Court judge ruled that the missives could be made public, the two hosts read the e-mails in their entirety on Friday afternoon April 5. The Los Angeles County District Attorney’s Office dispatched an investigator to KFI during the broadcast to obtain copies of the e-mails, which the station also provided to the Los Angeles Times, and then posted them on the KFI’s website.

About a week later, on April 12, Winton and Shuster (2002) reported that, Mahony had conducted a 90-minute news conference in the residence receiving room of the new downtown cathedral in Los Angeles.

In the interview Mahony admitted he never should have assigned Father Michael Wempe, one of the dismissed priests whose case was also mentioned in the leaked e-mails, to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles without informing hospital officials that he had removed Wempe from
his parish and ordered him to a New Mexico treatment facility for evaluation and counseling.

Mahony said he was told Wempe could, after the treatment, be trusted to work as a priest if he were in a supervised job without access to children. When he assigned Wempe, Mahony said that he did not know Cedars-Sinai had a pediatric unit.

Mahony added that he had recently given Wempe’s name to the Los Angeles Police Department to review past allegations against him. He said that he took full responsibility for the mistake of not simply telling the hospital of Wempe’s background.

In the interview, Mahony continued to refuse to give the names of the dismissed priests--repeating his earlier statement that he had been asked by two victims not to divulge the priests’ names. For the first time, however, Mahony clarified the number of known sex abuse cases. He said that seven cases allegedly occurred before 1997, four in the last five years, and another earlier four that were connected to priests who had left the ministry and could not be found. There was also a smaller group of allegedly abusive priests who were already deceased, Mahony said.
Six days later, on April 18, Stammer (2002) reported that Mahony had settled for another media interview to get the word out that he was committed to taking direct action against sexual abuse. He invited nine television stations and two all-news radio stations to the new cathedral’s conference center.

In the interview, Mahony stressed that he and the archdiocese were not only deeply sorry for those who had been victimized in the past by priests, but that he was taking “specific and forward-looking steps” to guard against abuses happening again. Mahony announced he was expanding the scope and authority of a panel overseeing all sexual abuse allegations in the Los Angeles Archdiocese in an effort to add more credibility to the process.

Mahony said, as he looked back over the clerical sex abuse allegations, he wished he had put two of the new programs in place earlier: an expanded panel of mostly laypeople to examine the accusations and claims, and an education program to teach children how to guard against sexual abuse and other types of violence. Mahony also said that he planned to add spiritual programs aimed at helping abuse victims who want to continue their involvement in the Church separate from therapy or other forms of counseling.
In addition, a special task force would be created by Mahony to determine how much the archdiocese had already paid to settle abuse claims against clergy members.

Mahony promised to expand the existing nine-member sexual abuse advisory council to 15 members, only three of whom would be priests. The council now consisted of seven lay members and two priests. Among the lay members were the parents of two children who had been molested by priests, and also a retired judge.

Mahony said he wanted to appoint a sexual abuse victim to the expanded panel, which would have much more authority than in the past over deciding how to resolve complaints of priest abuse. He said the new panel would develop and review sexual abuse policies for the archdiocese.

Mahony also said that the education programs, which were expected to be implemented in the 284 parishes in the archdiocese, were aimed at teaching children ways to avoid potentially dangerous situations, including sexual abuse, kidnapping, and neglect by adult. These programs, Mahony said, were designed to help children and young people in all kinds of situations; such as how to avoid being kidnapped, how to avoid pornography on the Internet, and how to deal with advances by abusers.
Mahony stated that there were several good existing programs that involved both minors and their parents. He said an archdiocesan working group was in the process of looking at these programs and should have recommendations to make to parishes within a few weeks. Mahony said his offer to create spiritual programs for sexual abuse victims may not appeal to some, but he believed it was important for the archdiocese to make "a spiritual outreach" regarding its sexual abuse crisis.

Mahony insisted that his archdiocese was cooperating with law enforcement authorities and that he had Zero Tolerance policy to prevent the maintenance of abusers in the archdiocese ministries. He said he had turned over names of the allegedly abusive priests to the Los Angeles Police Department, and he said that he continued to meet with the victims.

Mahony also mentioned about the accusation against him by the Fresno woman. He said that the Fresno police had concluded that there was no evidence to back up her testimony. The woman told reporters she had had mental problems and had been diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic.

At the end of the interview, Mahony said he regretted how he and the Church handled the abuse cases. Mahony
stated: "if I had known in 1986 or 1987 what I know in 2002, obviously we would done things differently. The Church relied very heavily on the recommendations of psychologists and others. Their recommendations to us now are far different."

On April 24, Watanabe and Shuster (2002) reported that Mahony had met with other American cardinals and Vatican officials in Italy in order to institute steps making it easier to defrock priests guilty of sexual abuse. In the meeting, Mahony called for the Zero Tolerance policy—which included the notion of ousting even those priests who had committed abuse decades ago and had stayed clean since. Mahony said in the meeting that, if the primary concern was protecting children and youth from abusive priests, then Zero Tolerance was the only solution. Unfortunately, the priests in the meeting remained less certain that Mahony's call for Zero Tolerance was the best solution to the crisis. Their refusal to approve the Zero Tolerance policy as promoted by Mahony disappointed many critics among American Catholics.

On May 16, Los Angeles County District Attorney Steve Cooley had threatened Mahony with a grand jury investigation unless the archdiocese surrendered all
documents related to the alleged sexual abuse of children. Cooley said it was no longer acceptable to provide only verbal information to law enforcement agencies. Without access to the archdiocese’s full written documentation on allegations, Cooley said, Los Angeles police and sheriff’s deputies were hampered in their investigations (Winton & Watanabe, 2002).

One day after being threatened with a grand jury investigation, Winton and Shuster (2002) reported, Mahony pledged to make the archdiocese’s files on priestly abuse available to the district attorney, the Los Angeles Police Department, and the county Sheriff’s Department. In a media interview that day, Mahony said that he would turn over documents that could include letters, notes of meetings, names and addresses of alleged priests, and other correspondence. He said they also would be made available to local law enforcement agencies if they require them. “We want every single thing out, open and dealt with,” Mahony said. “The last thing I want is this going on for months and months.” Additionally, Mahony said that he would work with the district attorney’s office to ask priests accused of abusing minors for authorization to release their confidential medical and psychological records.
On May 29, Hall (2002) reported that the archdiocese hired Sitrick & Co., a prominent and expensive public relations firm specializing in high-profile clients with big troubles. Before contracting with Sitrick, the archdiocese had been advised by public relations firm Weber Shandwick. According to Michael Hennigan, the archdiocese's attorney, the archdiocese hired Sitrick because the archdiocese was not doing well in the press.

Winton and Shuster (2002) reported that, Sitrick personnel advised Mahony to be featured in full-page ads on June 6 in three Los Angeles newspapers: Los Angeles Times, Daily News Los Angeles, and La Opinion, to reassure the public that Mahony was taking significant steps to prevent future abuse by priests in the archdiocese. Written as an open letter to residents of Los Angeles and surrounding communities, Mahony repeated many proposals he had previously announced in news conferences and interviews. He stressed how he made no exceptions to his Zero Tolerance policy. He also called for fingerprinting and criminal background checks for all priesthood candidates in the archdiocese. Mahony wrote that any new allegations of sexual abuse would be referred immediately to the police
and the accused priest would be removed from active ministry until the case was resolved.

Public Opinion on the Church’s Crisis Communication

When CBS News conducted a telephone poll to 892 adults nationwide from June 18 to June 20, 2002, survey results showed that most (74%) said United States leaders of the Catholic Church had done a poor job handling the recent charges of sexual abuse of children and teenagers by priests (CBS News Poll, 2002).

Another telephone poll was conducted by ABC News (2002) to 1,023 adults nationwide from June 19 to June 23, 2002. These survey results showed that almost half of the respondents (46%) strongly disapproved and 21% somewhat disapproved of the way the Catholic Church had handled the issue of sexual abuse of children by priests.

USA Today’s Cathy Lynn Grossman (2002) reported a telephone survey of 1,507 American Catholics on the Church’s response to the scandal. The poll was conducted by Le Moyne College, a Jesuit college in Syracuse, New York, with Zogby International Polling Firm from March 12-16, 2002.
The survey results showed that more than half (51%) of the respondents said that the Church had done a poor job handling the child sexual abuse issue. According to William Barnett, professor of religious studies at Le Moyne College, the scandal had damaged the credibility of American bishops. The approval rating of their leadership had plummeted from 85% in October 2001 to 68% in March 2002.

On October 20, Stammer (2002) reported a poll conducted by the Los Angeles Times. The poll results were based on 1,854 responses from Catholic priests nationwide to a survey conducted by mail from June 27 to October 11, 2002. Two-thirds of the nation's Roman Catholic priests disapproved of the way that U.S. bishops have handled sexual abuse allegations against members of clergy. The findings of the poll, the most extensive nationwide opinion survey of American priests since 1994, pointed out a pervasive and deep-seated anger among many priests. Many were upset at the nation's bishops. In written comments that many priests submitted with the poll responses, they said bishops delayed dealing with the crisis in the first place in January 2002. More than three out of five of those surveyed said they believed that most or many of the
allegations of sexual abuse of minors by priests were true. More than half (53%) said they thought the Church was too lenient in disciplining those accused of misconduct.

The survey results from all of these polls showed that the public nationwide, both Catholics and non-Catholics, disapproved of the way the Church handled the scandal and held the bishops responsible for the mishandling.

What was true nationwide was also true for the Los Angeles Archdiocese. On June 26, Watanabe (2002) reported, Mahony was named by Beliefnet.com, a leading religious website, as one of the nation's nine worst bishops in handling clergy sexual abuse. Beliefnet.com stated that, despite Mahony's recent efforts to take a tough stand on reform, he had failed to dismiss promptly at least three priests who reportedly admitted to sexual abuse of minors. The web site also stated that plaintiffs had charged Mahony with "concealing information" from law enforcement officials on abuse allegations. Its writers criticized the archdiocese's approach to victims as "potential litigants rather than wounded souls."

The respected site, which reaches nearly five million people a month, features news and commentary on a broad range of religious traditions, based its conclusions on
Mahony largely on its editors' interpretation of news media reports rather than on independent research.

Relevant Principles of Effective Crisis Communication

The Los Angeles Archdiocese's crisis communication in the child sexual abuse scandal can be evaluated by five principles of effective crisis communication. The principles are as follows:

1. Timeliness
2. Openness
3. Honesty
4. Regret
5. Accessibility

The first principle of effective crisis communication requires the organization to respond to the situation in a timely manner. According to Williams and Treadaway (1992), an organization in a crisis must be able to give a quick, definitive statement on the situation that specifies where the public and media attention should be focused, and what actions the organization will take. Berge (1990) and Wilson (1985) noted that with a quick response and with efforts to keep the organization's spokesperson visible to the media,
the organization gains its opportunity to tell its own side of the story. An organization that fails to provide such a response does not fulfill the goal of this timeliness principle.

The second principle of effective crisis communication is openness. During a crisis, an organization must be open to the media and its public by providing ongoing information (Pinsdorf, 1987; Gray, 1986; Anderson, 1979). All any reporter wants is some kind of response (Pinsdorf, 1987; Kempner, 1995). The reporter is doing his or her job and has to explain to the assignment editor why there is no quote or there is a blank tape with someone being silent or saying "no comment" (Kempner, 1995; Henry, 2000). To respond, even with ambiguity, is better than no response at all (Gottschalk, 1993; Dougherty, 1992).

The third principle of effective crisis communication necessitates that the organization be honest in its response. The organization’s spokesperson does not have to tell the media everything he or she knows, but what he or she does say should be accurate (Kim & Charles, 1988; Dunkle 1990). This applies not only to the literal accuracy of the facts, but also to the overall impression that the spokesperson presents (Nylen & Hultaker, 1987; Morris,
1991; Caponigro 2000). The organization’s spokesperson should not try to mislead the media and the public (Kempner, 1995). He or she should tell them what he or she can and should not talk about what he or she can’t (Kempner, 1995; Gottschalk, 1993; Caponigro, 2000).

The fourth principle of effective crisis communication is regret. The organization needs to apologize when appropriate and to show compassion to the victims (Ray, 1991; Fearn-Banks, 2002). The media and the public respect an early apology given rather than one that comes after a considerable period of stonewalling (Ray, 1991; Kempner, 1995; Dunkle 1990). They want the organization’s spokesperson to say that he or she is sorry it happened (Ray, 1990; Nylen & Hultaker, 1987). Not that the organization is guilty, or even responsible, just that it regrets the event (Dunkle, 1990). Then, they want the organization to assure them that it will not happen again (Kempner, 1995; Dougherty, 1992).

Throughout the length of the crisis, the organization must demonstrate its full and genuine concern (Gray, 1986). To show the media and the public that the organization is truly upset by the event and it will do everything possible
to ease the pain of the victims (Wilson, 1985; Ray, 1991; Kempner, 1995; Gray, 1986).

The fifth and last principle of effective crisis communication necessitates that the organization be accessible. A spokesperson should always take or return reporters' calls and try to be sensitive to the media's deadline problems (Nudell & Antokol, 1988; Fink, 1986). According to Caponigro (2000) accessibility is largely a matter of courtesy, but it also helps to eliminate any impression that the organization has some reason to avoid the press. The organization wants to at least appear to know what it is doing (Lerbinger, 1986). Returning a call just to say "I don't know" or "I can't talk about that" is much better than ignoring the call altogether (Wilson, 1985).
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the methodology employed in this study examining crisis communication strategy employed by the Los Angeles Archdiocese in communicating with the media during the child sexual abuse scandal. There are three methodology issues: 1) the time frame studied, 2) selection of sources of information about the archdiocese's crisis communication strategies, and 3) the critical model used to analyze those strategies.

The Time Frame

The study examines public communication from the archdiocese through the media from late January 2002 to early June 2002. The rationale for these parameters is straightforward.

The author considered this six-month time frame as the most reasonable because, during this period, the archdiocese was on its own in handling the crisis and in dealing with chorus of questions and criticisms with no specific guidance from other dioceses in the country or the Vatican. That guidance came in with the meeting of the
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on June 14, 2002, in Dallas, Texas. The guidance was in a form of two major documents: a "Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People" and a set of "Essential Norms for Diocesan/Eparchial Policies Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests, Deacons, or Other Church Personnel" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002).

Public Information Regarding the Scandal

Information describing the archdiocese's response to allegations of sexual misconduct came principally from two sources: the Los Angeles Times—who reported the most about the scandal, and the archdiocese's leaked internal e-mails.

As the nation's largest metropolitan daily newspaper and one of the nation's oldest newspapers, the Los Angeles Times dominates its media market (Los Angeles Times, 2003). It publishes five daily regional editions covering the Los Angeles metropolitan area, Orange and Ventura counties, the San Fernando Valley, and an Inland Empire edition covering Riverside and San Bernardino counties (Los Angeles Times, 2002). In 2002, the circulation was 1,006,130 daily and
1,367,932 on Sundays—the highest circulation ranking for a daily newspaper in the Los Angeles County (Los Angeles Almanac, 2002).

The archdiocese’s leaked internal e-mails, which described the archdiocese’s effort to contain sexual allegations, were broadcast by Los Angeles KFI Radio and were posted on the radio’s website.

The Model of Effective Crisis Communication

The model of effective crisis communication is based on the review of the literature. In Chapter Two, the author reviewed eleven books and seven journals written by leading public relations scholars and practitioners. The goal of this review was to sift out the principles of crisis management about which experts agree. The result was a five-factor model of crisis communication effectiveness. To be explained in detail in Chapter Four, this five-factor model includes: 1) timeliness, 2) openness, 3) honesty, 4) regret, and 5) accessibility.

The five-factor model of effective crisis communication is the author’s original contribution to research in the field of crisis communication. The author
comes to this five-factor model because it is applicable and it is the most efficient to examine the archdiocese’s child sexual abuse crisis. The five principles of effective crisis communication have currency to the literature credible model and are reflective across the board.
CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS

This chapter describes how the strategies employed by the Los Angeles Archdiocese in communicating with the media during its crisis of child sexual abuse violated the five principles of effective crisis communication: 1) timeliness, 2) openness, 3) honesty, 4) regret, and 5) accessibility.

Timeliness

The first principle of effective crisis communication requires the organization in a crisis to provide the media and the public with an immediate response about the situation, and to signify what actions it will take.

The Los Angeles Archdiocese violated the principle of timeliness by waiting too long to respond to its largest public to the scandal. This ongoing lack of timely response was actually employed throughout the six-month time frame.

Instead of making a strong, definitive statement immediately following the sex abuse lawsuit that was filed against Mahony in late January 2002, the archdiocese waited a month to respond through Mahony's pastoral statement. The
pastoral statement, however, only stated the archdiocese’s compliance with its Zero Tolerance policy and the California Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act. There was no response to the lawsuit, which had served to put the archdiocese in a less-defensible position. Eventually, throughout the six months period, the archdiocese refused to publicly discuss the case and its settlement.

The archdiocese’s position was further compromised when it delayed responding to the media’s second bombardment on March 4 about the archdiocese’s cover-up effort of the dismissals. The archdiocese’s spokesperson did respond immediately that day, but he did not mention the dismissals. He only said that Mahony was committed to obeying the California Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act and protecting the children of the archdiocese. Mahony did not publicly confirmed the dismissals until 18 days later, on March 22, and continued to decline to release the names and number of the dismissed priests. He also failed to explain the archdiocese’s reasons without explaining the reasons for not revealing the information. He did not publicly explain these reasons until ten days later, on April 2.
The delayed-response strategy continued following the Fresno woman’s accusation on March 22. When the Fresno woman accused Mahony of molesting her as a high school student in the 1970s, Mahony did immediately report the accusation to Los Angeles Police Department and did deny the allegation, but made no response to the media and the public on that day. Mahony did not publicly discuss the case until 26 days later, on April 18.

The archdiocese’s credibility was further damaged when it failed to provide an immediate response to its leaked internal e-mails that were aired by Los Angeles KFI Radio on April 4 and April 5. Instead of dealing with the content of the e-mails, the archdiocese tried to cover it up by obtaining a cease-and-desist order from the Superior Court to prevent the e-mails being broadcast by the radio station. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the leaked e-mails revealed that Mahony had fired eight accused priests, and that the archdiocese officials had made conscious effort to contain some of the sexual abuse allegations. When Mahony publicly responded a week later, on April 12, he said that he regretted his decision to transfer Father Michael Wempe, one of the accused priests mentioned in the leaked e-mails, to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center. He also clarified the
number of known sex abuse cases but, again, he neglected to mention the leaked e-mails.

The archdiocese’s lack of timely responses showed the archdiocese’s lack of responsibility in the crisis to media personnel, members of the Los Angeles Archdiocese, members of other Catholic dioceses worldwide, regional law enforcement and court officials, and businesses and non-governmental organizations allied with the Los Angeles Archdiocese.

The delayed-response strategy damaged the archdiocese’s image and angered the public, as evidenced by protesters confronting Mahony on March 24, who said that, with total 50 sexual abuse cases in the last five years alone, Mahony had, even before the current crisis, ignored the sex abuse problem for far too long and had not for some years been nearly forthcoming enough.

Openness

The second principle of effective crisis communication requires that the organization in a crisis be open to the media and the public about the situation and that it provides ongoing information throughout the crisis period.
The archdiocese violated the principle of openness. In late January 2002, Mahony refused to answer questions from the media about the sex abuse lawsuit recently filed against him. Mahony and other archdiocese officials preferred silence and never publicly discussed the case.

This closed strategy continued following the dismissals of charged priests on March 4. When asked by the media about the names and number of priests dismissed, the archdiocese officials declined to reveal any information and did not provide any justifications for their refusal. They were also unwilling to comment on whether the archdiocese had reported the abuse cases of these particular priests to the local police.

The archdiocese repeated the same mistake after March 22 by not responding to the media about the Fresno woman’s accusation against Mahony himself. The archdiocese made no public announcement about the accusation on that day, and its officials refused to answer questions about it. This was the second time Mahony had chosen to ignore requests to respond about the sex abuse allegations against him.

The archdiocese’s credibility is heavily dependent on its responsibility to respond to questions and concerns of the public and the press as openly as possible. Its
strategy of silence and withholding information not only damaged its image with the press, but also further angered the public. John Lynch, a lifelong faithful who went to Catholic school all the way through college, told the Los Angeles Times Columnist Steve Lopez (2002) on March 15 that he was tired of the archdiocese’s silence and denials. Lynch said:

    Enough with the tap dance. Catholics are fed up with cover-ups, and we’re not going to take it anymore. They throw a few lower clergy to the wolves, and that’s it? You’ve got to figure it goes up higher than that, and this culture of silence, this atmosphere of whispers and rumors, it’s just no good anymore.

    Honesty

    The third principle of effective crisis communication necessitates that the organization be honest in its response to the situation, by providing accurate and straightforward information. The archdiocese violated the principle of honesty by providing the media with inaccurate information about its accused priests.

    The archdiocese was not being honest in its response on March 4 when asked by the media if the archdiocese had
given the names of the dismissed priests to the local police. The archdiocese’s spokesperson responded that Mahony had complied with the legally mandated reporting law that obligated each person working for the archdiocese to report any suspicion of child abuse to the local police. His statement implied that the archdiocese had given the names and all information necessary of the dismissed priests to the local police. When contacted by the Los Angeles Times on that same day, the local police said that they had not received any calls from the archdiocese officials regarding those allegations.

The archdiocese repeated the same misleading strategy in its response on March 22. That day, Mahony confirmed in The Tidings that the dismissals had occurred, stating that he had dismissed six to 12 of the archdiocese’s priests accused of past sexual abuse. He refused to reveal the exact number. He said that all of the priests’ names had been duly reported to the authorities, and they had been prosecuted and had served their probation many years ago. In one of the archdiocese’s leaked internal e-mails, however, Mahony wrote to his officials and attorneys that out of the total of eight accused priests he had dismissed, the archdiocese had reported only five to the local police,
and had failed to report the other three. The e-mails not only proved that the archdiocese’s public relations effort was misleading the public with inaccurate information, they suggested that this was a conscious strategy.

This strategy continued in a media interview on April 2 when Mahony said that none of the recently dismissed priests were currently involved in any ministry involving children or youths. Mahony further stated in the interview that most of the dismissed priests were already retired—some of them were living outside the archdiocese and remained canonically attached as priests to the archdiocese.

This statement appears to violate Mahony’s pledge in his pastoral statement on February 21 that “the archdiocese will not knowingly assign or retain a priest, deacon, religious or layperson to serve in its parishes, schools, pastoral ministries, or any other assignment when such an individual is determined to have previously engaged in sexual abuse of a minor.”

In addition, a dialogue in one of the leaked internal e-mails between two archdiocese officials, Sister Judy Murphy and Monsignor Craig Cox, proved that the archdiocese had lied in its response about removing all accused priests
from the ministry. In the e-mail, Sister Murphy wrote Monsignor Cox that, there was an accused priest whose name was in Mahony’s "recently removed" list, but actually was never removed from the ministry (Archdiocese of Los Angeles, 2002).

The archdiocese’s credibility also depended on its abilities to respond to the situation with honest attempts. The archdiocese’s strategy of misleading the public by providing inaccurate information to the media accomplished the opposite. The strategy further jeopardized its position, as it made the archdiocese appear insincere in its desire to protect children and youths from sex abuse as its top priority. Lopez (2002) commented in his column in the Los Angeles Times published on April 5:

It would have been nice to find out how many priests Mahony dismissed recently, so the media does not have to keep referring to a number between six and 12. By not telling us the real number, we’re left with no choice but to wonder if maybe it’s even more than between six and 12. Maybe it was between six and 14, or maybe the cardinal doesn’t even know himself, and is embarrassed to admit it. If you’re not going to
answer basic questions, all you can accomplish is to keep getting those very questions tossed back at you.

Regret

The fourth principle of effective crisis communication suggests that the organization in a crisis apologize and show compassion to the victims early in the crisis period. This strategy is fundamental, because the media and the public respect an early apology rather than one that comes after a considerable period of stonewalling. The archdiocese violated this principle by waiting too long to apologize and to show its compassion to the victims.

Approximately two months after the scandal first erupted, Mahony told about 300 Catholic priests at a mass at Our Lady of Refuge Church in Long Beach that, as the head of the archdiocese, he apologized and accepted responsibility for the "sins in the past" by priests. He promised that the archdiocese would cooperate with the law enforcement on sexual abuse cases. However, he added that he would not release to the public the names of the alleged pedophile priests. His omissions led stakeholders to assume he was hiding and protecting them, as well as the
image of the Church, instead of the safety of its youngest members.

About a month after the mass, Mahony apologized for a second time in a media interview. He said that he and other archdiocese officials were “deeply sorry for those who had been victimized by the priests” and announced that, “the archdiocese would take forward-looking actions” to guard against sex abuse in the archdiocese. He also expressed regret for his and the archdiocese’s mishandling of the scandal.

Archdiocesan officials’ delay in apologizing about the scandal and in showing compassion to the victims weakened their credibility even further, as news of the scandals grew wilder and uglier. Week by week new allegations of abuse against children leaked out, causing the press continue to print negative stories about the Church’s handling of the crisis.

Accessibility

The final principle of effective crisis communication requires the organization in a crisis to be accessible to the media and the public. The principle obliges the organization to always return reporters’ calls, to
eliminate the impression that the organization has some reason to avoid the press. This principle holds that the organization should persuade the media to depend on the organization's spokesperson for information. If the organization fails to provide reliable access, media reporters will seek for information from other sources, who can cause their news stories to be misleading. By not returning media's calls, the archdiocese violated this principle.

This occurred on March 4, when personnel the archdiocese failed to call media reporters back with information about the dismissed priests. As a result of that, the media looked for the information from other sources who were familiar with the dismissals.

On March 13, Lopez (2002) reported that the archdiocese officials again did not return his calls when he asked them whether they called the police regarding the accused priests. When he did not hear from anyone at the archdiocese, Lopez (2002) said he went to talk to prosecutors George Palmer and Irene Wakabayashi in the Los Angeles County district attorney's office for information. From his conversation with the two prosecutors, Lopez (2002) concluded that priests could get away from reporting
sex abuse to the law enforcement authorities because of the Church’s own legal system. Lopez (2002) said:

There are so many loopholes in child abuse cases. It wouldn’t be hard for the Catholic Church or another institution to hide behind a technicality and legally avoid calling the police in most cases. If a claim of sex abuse is made during confession, for instance, the priest can keep it quiet because of clergy privilege. If the alleged crime occurred before 1987 but was reported afterward, the church doesn’t have to call the police because clergy, for reasons only the devil knows, essentially got a waiver prior to 1987.
CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has examined crisis communication in the case of child sexual abuse scandal involving the Roman Catholic Los Angeles Archdiocese. In this chapter, the author draws conclusions regarding the archdiocese’s handling of the crisis and make recommendations about effective crisis communication principles for public relations practitioners and for academic community.

Conclusions

This study has shown that the archdiocese clearly failed to satisfy the five principles of effective crisis communication. The combination of slow, indecisive responses and other unsuccessful strategies damaged the archdiocese’s image with the media and the public during this period.

Instead of responding to the initial statements of the media and the public, the archdiocese actually needed to be proactive after the sex abuse lawsuit was filed against Mahony in the last weekend of January 2002. To minimize damage to its image, within 24 hours after the lawsuit, the
archdiocese should have provided the media and the public with straightforward information about the situation, the steps the archdiocese planned to take to handle the crisis, and an apology for what had happened to the victims.

The archdiocese’s lack of a strong initial response allowed the media and others to alert the world about its scandal. Its hesitancy also immediately placed the archdiocese in the position of responding to changes without much of a defense. The archdiocese’s reactive stance worsened when someone leaked the archdiocese’s internal e-mails containing comments on the dismissed priests that proved its earlier statements had been inaccurate. This inactivity added the possibility of dishonesty to the archdiocese’s initial communication problems.

Recommendations

This study has shown that silence will not make an issue to go away. It will worsen the situation and will damage an organization’s credibility. As an example of crisis communication, what can readers learn from the archdiocese’s handling of this crisis? Here are some recommendations for public relations practitioners:
1. Respond to a crisis within 24 hours. To be able to respond to the crisis immediately, an organization must have a prior crisis communication plan. This provides an advantage to the communicator in determining which issues to address and in predicting how they will be viewed by the large public. Not responding to the crisis immediately was a fatal mistake that damaged the archdiocese’s credibility.

2. Tell the truth and be open. Always provide the media with facts about the situation and be consistent with your response. Giving the media misleading information with omitted facts damaged the archdiocese’s credibility.

3. Always return reporters’ calls. Let them to depend on you for stories. The archdiocese ignored reporters’ deadlines and failed to return their calls. This gave the impression that the archdiocese was trying to contain information, which caused reporters seek stories from other sources.

This study has proven that the five-factor model of effective crisis communication presented can be applied successfully in analyzing the archdiocese’s communication strategies in the sex abuse crisis. The model is the author’s new contribution to the literature on case analyses of crisis communication. Therefore, for future
research in crisis communication, this study suggests
public relations academicians to use this model in
analyzing organizational communication crises.
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