Dealing with negative press attention

Occasionally churches may be subject to negative press attention. Sometimes you may be aware that this is coming and can plan a response in advance, however other times it may catch you off guard. It is a good idea to contact the diocesan comms team as soon as possible.

Establish the facts

When first becoming aware of the negative press story, first pause and gather facts:

- Identify what actually happened
- Determine what is confirmed versus alleged
- Collect relevant documents or records
- Identify who has direct knowledge
- Preserve evidence
- Avoid speculation

Do not rely on rumours circulating within the congregation.

Inform key leaders

Depending on the seriousness of the matter, notify:

- Diocesan communications team (it is always a good idea to notify the diocesan comms team as soon as possible)
- Incumbent or priest-in-charge
- Churchwardens
- PCC officers
- Archdeacon
- Bishop's office
- Diocesan safeguarding adviser
- Legal advisers

Avoid fragmented communication where multiple leaders speak independently.

Appoint a single spokesperson

Working with some of the groups above, one person should coordinate external communication.

This may be:

- The incumbent
- A diocesan communications officer
- A bishop or archdeacon
- A designated spokesperson

Everyone else should know who is authorised to comment.

Prepare a holding statement

Often you cannot say much to the press for legal or safeguarding reasons or until an investigation has been completed. A holding statement is a short initial response.

Example:

"We are aware of the concerns that have been raised. The matter is being taken seriously and appropriate processes are being followed. We are unable to comment further at this stage."

Good holding statements:

- Acknowledge the issue
- Avoid defensiveness
- Avoid prejudging outcomes
- Avoid excessive detail
- Avoid speculation

Pause non-essential social media activity

Suspend scheduled posts if necessary.

A cheerful fundraising campaign or celebratory parish content appearing during a serious controversy can look insensitive.