

Transportation Safety

Keep your congregation members safe while on the road

by Jeff Hanna

Transporting congregation members to and from church-sponsored activities is a part of every ministry. But, many church leaders do not take the necessary precautions to protect congregation members. Since every organization that owns or operates a vehicle is vulnerable to accidents, it is important that church leaders learn about ways to prevent accidents from occurring and make this aspect of ministry as safe as possible.

Unique Setting

Churches are unique, as they often have to transport large groups of members both long and short distances. Many churches rely on member or parent drivers who have not been properly trained to operate large vehicles. And, many churches use 15-passenger vans, which have been found to be at great risk of rolling over. Other accidents are a result of unsafe equipment, inadequate selection of drivers, driver or passenger error, and the improper selection or use of a vehicle.

Taking a proactive approach, establishing a transportation policy, and then closely following that policy can save a church and individuals much heartache. Furthermore, taking the initiative, preparing adequately, and ensuring proper practices are followed, can help prevent or minimize the severity of an accident.

Developing A Church Transportation Policy

To protect the people who have been entrusted to their care requires church leaders to take ownership of the situation and make safety a high priority. This can be done by developing a church transportation policy. Whether the church has a specific "transportation committee" in place or not, a policy that covers all aspects of transportation is important, regardless if the church owns its own vehicles or uses volunteer drivers and their personal vehicles.

A majority of vehicle accidents are caused by basic safety violations, an overall lack of awareness of safety precautions or poor vehicle maintenance. A meaningful and realistic policy must be established for your church to protect your congregation members from possible injury.

Forming A Transportation Committee

If your church doesn't have a "safety & security committee," and it has church-owned vehicles, it is necessary to have a "transportation committee" that includes administrative staff, drivers, maintenance workers and parents. The transportation committee should be responsible for developing an effective and comprehensive safety program that includes a written policy, maintenance schedule, a mandatory pre-trip inspection checklist,



proper driver selection with periodic reviews and defensive driver training. Once a safety program is established, the committee should meet periodically to monitor the effectiveness of the program and drivers, oversee vehicle compliance and to maintain necessary records.

The following should be a part of every transportation policy:

Driver Selection—This is one of the most important components, as the driver is the person responsible for keeping passengers safe. The process for selecting who is qualified and eligible to drive to and from activities should be extensive. All applicants should complete specific forms.

Further, background, insurance, motor vehicle and commercial drivers license checks should take place. Statistics also show that individuals under the age of 25 and over 70 have a higher accident rate, which also should be taken into consideration.

In addition, personal insurance coverage on drivers should be obtained with a minimum of \$100,000/\$300,000 primary and a \$1 million umbrella. Above all, take the time to be selective by checking experience and contacting references. The safety of the members of your church should be a top priority.

Vehicle Selection—As mentioned earlier, the use of 15-passenger vans, the transportation choice of many churches, has recently come under scrutiny and has become a concern of both state and federal agencies due to their high propensity to roll over. Because of this fact, some insurance companies have decided to stop insuring these vehicles all together and others are significantly raising rates. If your church owns a 15-passenger van, you are highly encouraged to consider purchasing safer alternatives such as small buses. It also is recommended that you check with your insurer to verify how coverage is being handled for 15-passenger vans. For more information on the dangers of these vehicles, visit the GuideOne Center for Risk Management at www.guideonecenter.com.

Driver Training—Drivers should be trained on the safe operation of all vehicles that they will be operating. Driving vans/buses and towing trailers present significantly different driving challenges than normal passenger car operation. Loading and unloading procedures should be taught. Planning of transportation routes, operation of equipment, responding to emergencies, and filing reports should be a part of driver training. Also, awareness of specific hazards, such as the rollover propensity of 15-passenger vans, should be taught.

GuideOne offers an inexpensive defensive driving course, titled "Coaching the Van Driver II." For more information on this training, which includes a video, participant workbooks and online testing sessions, please visit www.guideonecenter.com.

Vehicle Inspection & Maintenance—Assigning responsibility for the maintenance and upkeep of church vehicles, as well as inspecting private vehicles that are used for church business, is necessary. A policy should clearly require both pre- and post-trip inspection checklists. Written inspection and maintenance records should be maintained for each long distance trip.

Use of Non-Owned Vehicles—A policy should include how drivers of privately owned vehicles will be selected and supervised. A certificate of insurance or copy of the vehicle's insurance card should be required. It is especially helpful to keep an "authorized driver" list on file.

Safe Driving and Passenger Rules—Drivers must follow the rules of the road, and also meet certain responsibilities defined by the committee that oversees the policy. Seat belts must be worn at all times by each person in the vehicle and any misconduct by drivers or passengers must be reported immediately. In addition, procedures should be developed and followed by every driver regarding how to proceed in the event an accident occurs.

Safety Equipment Requirements—A list of necessary items to take on a trip should be given to all drivers and follow-up should be made to ensure the presence of the listed equipment. This list should include such things as a cellular telephone, blankets, food, bottled water, maps, jumper cables, emergency phone numbers, etc.

Providing safe transportation to members of your congregation is a vital part of ministry and no church should have to experience the devastating effects of an accident that results in severe injuries or even death. Please take the necessary steps to make sure your vehicles are well maintained and driven by trained individuals.

Jeff Hanna is Executive Director of the GuideOne Center for Risk Management's Church Division. He is a former detective and pastor, and also is the author of Safe and Secure: The Alban Guide to Protecting Your Congregation, Safeguard Solutions Volumes I and II, as well as numerous articles.

The GuideOne Center for Risk Management is dedicated to helping churches safeguard their ministries by providing practical and timely training, and resources on safety, security and risk management issues.

Contact Hanna by calling 877.448.4331, ext. 5118, or via e-mail at crm@guidemail.com.

***Many of the above mentioned forms and checklists are available in "Safeguard Solutions" Volumes I and II. For ordering information, please visit www.guideonecenter.com.