

Churches finding it hard to park 15-passenger vans despite troubles

By George Henson

Staff Writer

More than 2,000 Texas churches continue to operate a vehicle the state's major insurer of churches has declared "inherently unsafe."

GuideOne, the church insurer endorsed by the Annuity Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, insures nearly 4,000 Texas churches. Of those, about 2,000 maintain policies on 15-passenger vans. Some of those churches own and insure more than one such van.

Nationwide, GuideOne insures more than 50,000 churches, 10,000 of which own 15-passenger vans.

The insurer has strongly encouraged churches to dispose of or stop using 15-passenger vans: "GuideOne believes 15-passenger vans to be inherently unsafe. We encourage our policyholders to strongly consider other transportation options."

Although the company still covers 15-passenger vans already insured, it has stopped writing

new policies for the large vans. It also has issued regulations about who may operate the vans. All drivers are required to have a commercial driver's license, a chauffeur's license or pass a defensive driver's course.

In April, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reissued a cautionary warning to users of 15-passenger vans. Government research has determined 15-passenger vans have a rollover risk that dramatically increases as the number of occupants increases from fewer than five people to more than 10.

The rollover rate for 15-passenger vans in single-vehicle crashes nearly triples when the vans are loaded with 10 or more occupants as compared to fewer than five occupants.

Critics of 15-passenger vans raise three primary objections: The weight and center of gravity of the vans make them more susceptible to rollovers; the design does not allow them to endure a side-impact

crash; and many of the deaths in the vans have been attributed to occupants not wearing seat belts.

An investigation by CBS News revealed at least 424 people nationwide have been killed and hundreds seriously injured in rollovers of the vans since 1990.

These findings have placed many Texas Baptist churches in a quandary—they don't want to keep operating vehicles that may be unsafe, but they also have large sums of money invested in the vans. The vans are popular because they provide a relatively inexpensive way to transport a group of people in a vehicle that anyone with a regular license can drive.

And if Texas Baptist churches sell their 15-passenger vans, they fear they may be passing on the safety hazard to others.

First Baptist Church of Athens, for example, has stopped using its four 15-passenger vans.

"We've parked them and pulled the keys," said Family

See CHURCH, page 15

GuideOne's van guidelines

By taking the following precautions, churches can help minimize, but not eliminate, the potential for rollovers in 15-passenger vans:

- ◆ Ensure all drivers are trained to operate the van safely.
- ◆ Make sure all drivers are on an approved-drivers list.
- ◆ Remove the back seat.
- ◆ Perform pre- and post-trip maintenance checks.
- ◆ Enforce seatbelt usage.
- ◆ Limit the number of riders to 10.
- ◆ Prohibit vans from being driven in excess of 60 miles per hour.
- ◆ Buy high-quality tires.
- ◆ Keep the gas tank as full as possible to lower the vehicle's center of gravity.
- ◆ Drive conservatively.
- ◆ Fill the front seats first.
- ◆ Do not pull trailers.
- ◆ Never load items on the roof of the vehicle.

Church insurer encourages parking 15-passenger vans

◆ *Continued from page 1*
Minister Joe Wood.

Parking the vans was the easy decision, but determining what to do with them now is harder, Wood noted.

"We would prefer they not be used for people transport, but after we sell them to someone, I don't guess we have much control over that," he said. "But from a moral standpoint, we don't want anyone riding in those vans. We would like to find someone who would remove all the rear seats and carry things back there and just have one or two people riding in it."

For now, the Athens church charters buses for all trips. The church's transportation committee hopes to bring a final recommendation within the next six months.

Shiloh Terrace Baptist Church in Dallas has bought a 24-passenger bus but is holding on to its 15-passenger van until more members acquire the commercial driver's licenses re-

quired to drive the bus.

"We're still using it for a few things, but we've put a lot of restrictions on it," said Scott McLaughlin, interim church administrator. Among those restrictions are a limit of eight occupants and a maximum driving speed of 60 miles per hour.

"As long as the 15-passenger vans are operated at a low speed and at a low weight capacity, the rollover rate isn't that much greater than it is for a car," McLaughlin said. Nevertheless, he plans to get rid of the van as soon as a few more qualified drivers are licensed for the bus, probably by the end of the year.

Hampton Road Baptist Church in DeSoto, meanwhile, has two 15-passenger vans and has no plans to dispose of them in the near future, said Bob Moore, minister of education and administration.

"These are both low-mileage vehicles, but when we do replace

them, we'll probably go to 15-passenger buses," he said.

The church does not allow any towing by the vans, limits the number of people riding in the van to 10 plus the driver and does not allow heavy cargo to be stowed in the back of the van.

Hampton Road also held a driving clinic for drivers of the 15-passenger vans. The class acquainted drivers with the unique handling characteristics of 15-passenger vans. Fifteen people attended the clinic.

Those unique driving characteristics have been noted by GuideOne and the National Transportation Safety Board.

Critics believe the van's body extends too far beyond the rear axle, causing the back end to swing out uncontrollably during quick maneuvers. This condition is exaggerated further if the van is towing a trailer.

The vans also are said to be top-heavy, because they are built

on a cargo van base. The design was based on carrying cargo on the floor, not passengers elevated off the floor.

For this reason, critics contend the vans actually are more dangerous for adults than children, because adults are taller and heavier, raising the center of gravity in the van even more.

The solution to the problem, according to GuideOne literature, is for churches to use 15-passenger buses rather than the vans.

"The big difference between 15-passenger vans and buses is that buses are designed and made specifically to pass government safety tests for passenger vehicles," the insurer has told churches. "Fifteen-passenger vans are not held to this same standard. Buses generally are encased in a steel cage, have stronger flooring, specially designed seating with better collapse and impact absorption and better rollover protection."

The vans do not have side bar protection, meaning passengers face greater risk of injury from side-impact collisions, according to GuideOne.

Federal safety regulations governing 15-passenger vans also are less strenuous than those governing small buses.

On the other hand, the greatest determining factor in whether occupants in rollover crashes live or die is the use of seatbelts. According to the National Highway Transportation Safety Board, 80 percent of people killed in van rollover crashes in the last 10 years were not wearing safety belts. Passengers who wear seatbelts in 15-passenger vans are 75 percent less likely to be killed in a rollover crash than people who don't.

Ford Motor Co., manufacturer of the popular Econoline 15-passenger van, maintains the vehicles are "very safe." However, Ford also says it agrees with government recommendations that the vehicles be operated only by trained drivers and that all passengers should wear seat belts.

Churches, meanwhile, may be looking for an ejection seat with a parachute.

Churches wanting to sell their 15-passenger vans may not get the kind of financial deal they want, warned Nick England, president of Lasseter Bus and Mobility in Lewisville.

"Churches should not have real high expectations about what they can get for their 15-passenger vans," he said. "There's just a real glut on the market, especially as more and more churches are trying to get out of these vehicles."

"But our experience has been that they are not really deterred by that. There just seems to be a feeling of cutting their losses because they realize this is not the vehicle they need."