A common transport vehicle for church-related activities is the 15-passenger van. The vehicles have come under extra scrutiny because of high rollover rates. To help prevent rollovers, the back seat can be removed to limit the passengers to a maximum of 10. Other safety recommendations include adequate tire pressure and onboard safety equipment.

J.D. Schwalm/The Clarion-Ledger

Clarion-Ledger

Vans: Churches need to think safety first

cgraham@clarionledger.com

Drive the highways anywhere in the United States and you are bound to see a variety of church vehicles. Chances are that most of these vehicles will be 15-passenger vans.

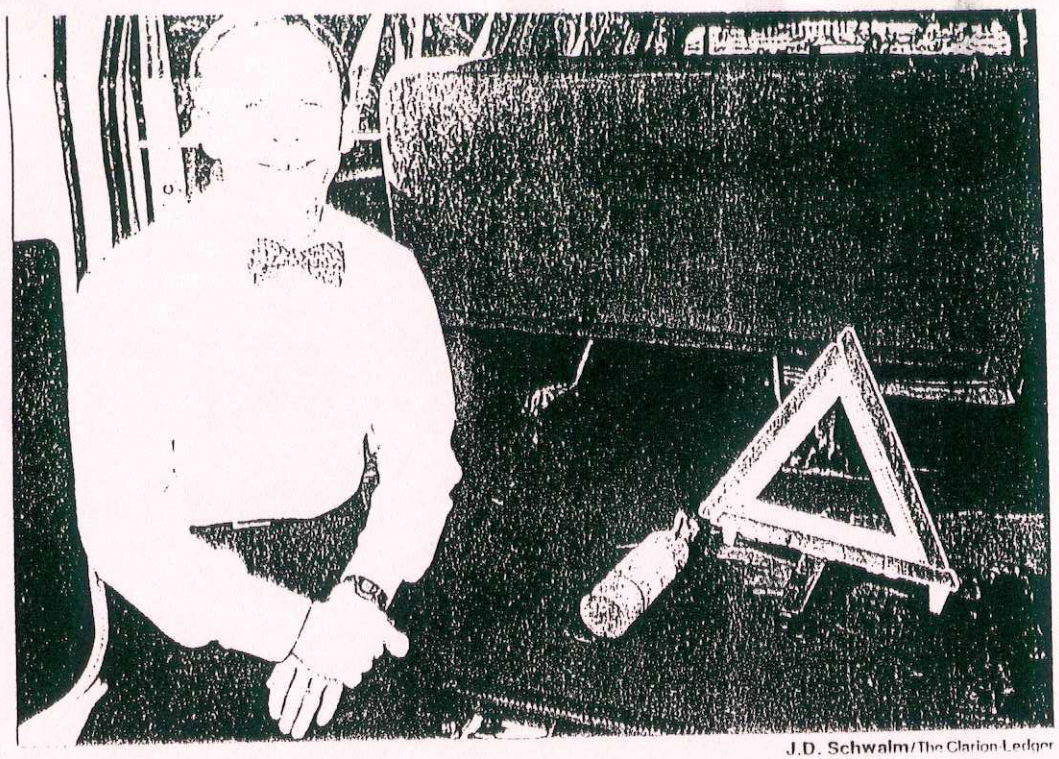
They are the vehicle of choice for churches when making mission trips and transporting youth or seniors to meetings, outings and services. Yet, many people do not understand that these vans do not pass the same government safety tests that other passenger vehicles or buses do.

According to *School Transportation News*, the traditional 15-passenger van is structurally a different vehicle. The area behind the driver is designed to carry only cargo and does not have sidebar protection, which is built into passenger vehicles, including minivans.

In contrast, school buses have horizontal and vertical beams and thick sheets of steel on both sides of the shell. Church vans, on the other hand, have a much thinner outer layer of sheet metal. Thin interior vertical strips hold the outer layer in place, with only the interior molding and plastic of the passenger compartment on the other side of these strips.

School Transportation News also reports that many of these vehicles use cardboard as the primary component between the exterior of the vehicle and the interior compartment.

In addition, Jeff Hanna, executive director of the GuideOne Center for Risk Management and a former detective and pastor, says recent reports show that 15-passenger vans are easy to rollover.



J.D. Schwalm/The Clarion-Ledger

Earl Davis of the First Presbyterian Church in Jackson shows some of the safety equipment, like large reflectors and fire extinguishers, that are kept in the church van.

In April 2001, the National Highway Traffic and Safety Administration issued a report stating that a study of 15-passenger van crashes showed the propensity to roll over increases significantly with the occupancy level. Loading a 15-passenger van causes the center of gravity to shift rearward and upward. This increases the likelihood of rollover and the potential for loss of control during panic maneuvers.

Recent reports reveal that since 1990, more than 400 people have lost their lives in van rollover accidents and hundreds more have been seriously injured.

"That's why these vehicles are often referred to as 'non-conforming vans,'" added Hanna.

Headquartered in West Des Moines, Iowa, GuideOne is one of the nation's leading church insurers. Founded in 1947, GuideOne also insures schools and colleges, as well as not-for-profit senior living communities.

GuideOne has spent five months pulling together information and making it available to policyholders.

"There are three primary areas of concern in regards to the equipment and designs of 15-passenger vans — rollovers, side impacts and seatbelt use," says Hanna. "Our hope and desire is that we make sound business decisions, but more than that, we recognize our need to try to save lives.

"Our goal is to educate first and then possibly pursue legislation that drivers need to be qualified to use these vans."

Other insurance companies like Birmingham-based State Farm Insurance also have concerns about the safety of these vans

"We always encourage people to drive safely and be aware of the roads, to be aware of their surroundings," says Emily Gong, a State Farm public affairs specialist. "We look at a lot of official Web sites, like that of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, to make sure we are getting accurate information. We obviously want to have the right information if we are asked about an issue such as the 15-passenger vans."

See VANS, 2E

For your safety

It is recommended that churches owning or utilizing large vans do the following:

- Ensure that all drivers are trained to safely operate a 15-passenger van;
- Make sure all drivers are on the approved drivers list;
- Remove the back seat;
- Perform pre- and post-trip maintenance checks;
- Enforce seatbelt usage;
- Limit the number of passengers, including the driver, to 10;
- Prohibit vans from being driven in excess of 60 miles-per-hour;
- Buy high quality tires and ensure they are inflated properly;
- 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; and
- Never load items on the roof of the vehicle.

Source: "Road to Safety: Recognizing the Dangers of 15-Passenger Vans (Church and School Van Guide)" by GuideOne Insurance.

Vans: Using seatbelts and not overcrowding ensure safety

From 1E

Hanna says GuideOne wants to be sure organizations that own, use or rent these vans are aware of their potential for accidents.

"With the recent increase in van rollover deaths and insurance claims, it only makes sense that we take a stand on this issue," adds Hanna. "We want people to know about the danger of these vans."

Kathy Wolfe, business administrator at Brandon's Crossgates Baptist Church, read about these and other safety concerns about 15-passenger vans in a report issued by the National Highway Transportation.

She shared what she had learned with the church's executive staff, and as a safety precaution, they decided to move one of the seats from the church's two 15-passenger vans.

"We decided to limit the vans' occupancy to eight passengers and a driver," says Wolfe. "We were concerned about rollovers, so we decided it would be best to remove a seat. Safety is a priority here."

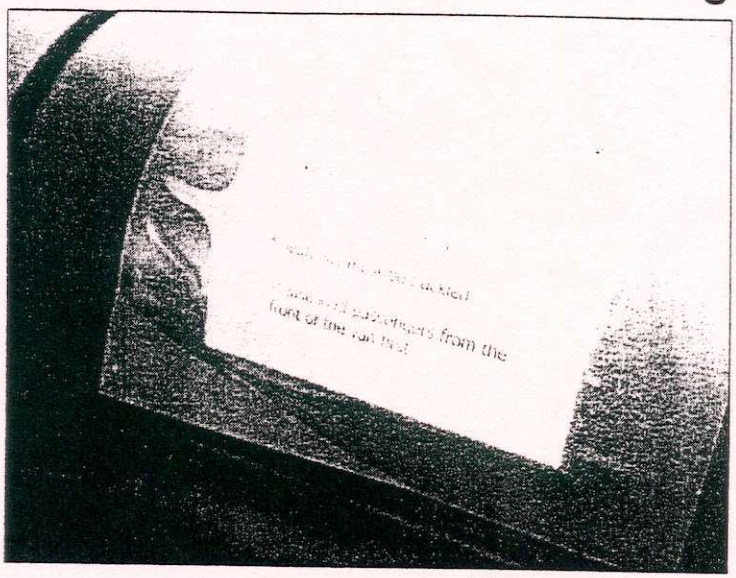
Earl Davis, business administrator at Jackson's First Presbyterian Church, also is concerned about the safety of those riding their church vans.

"We have not had any problems with the vans at our church, but we are going to heed the warnings," says Davis. "The insurance company prefers that we have a total of 10 people in the vans and they require that all drivers of the van have a commercial, Class D driver's license."

The church, insured by GuideOne, also enrolls its drivers in a four-hour training course offered by GuideOne, in conjunction with DriveOne, the nation's leading driver training and education company.

The $60 Coaching the Van Driver II kit includes a video, five participant response books and five online testing sessions.

Topics covered in the course include van characteristics, pre-trip inspection, safety belts, cushion safety, scanning, blind spots, backing and more.



J.D. Schwalm/ The Clarion-Ledger

A notice on the dashboard of a church van alerts passengers to new rules of the ride.

Those interested in ordering the material can visit the GuideOne Web site at www.guideone center.com.

"These vans handle differently from the average car," says Davis. "It's important to know what to do and how to handle these vehicles in emergency situations."

First Presbyterian has two 15-passenger vans that are used for various church functions. They are not used by the church's day school and kindergarten.

It's Hanna's desire to see churches turn to some other means of transportation, preferably minibuses.

"Don't wait until a tragic accident impacts your church community to take action on this important safety concern," advises Hanna. "Consider the case of a church trip that turned deadly for an Atlanta area congregation in 1998.

"The church van, which was over-loaded with 19 occupants, many of them children, blew a tire and rolled down an embankment. Every passenger was ejected from the van. As a result, two occupants — both children —were killed and five others were hospitalized for an extended period of time. The driver was charged with second-degree homicide and eight seatbelt violations.

"As you can imagine, the impact on this church's ministry was devastating."

It always devastates Jim Willis, state safety engineer with the Mississippi Department of Transportation to hear of lives lost because individuals are not wearing seatbelts. Willis says that from 1990 to 1999, 80 percent of all people killed on Mississippi streets and highways were not wearing seatbelts.

"As far as a tip for those in vans, or any other vehicle for that matter, I would say make absolutely certain that all passengers are buckled up," adds Willis. "A lot of lives could have been saved if only people remembered to buckle up."

Hanna believes even more lives could be saved if people stay out of 15-passenger vans. He says the National Highway Transportation has determined that when you have 10 or more passengers in a 15-passenger van, you have a 35 percent more chance of a rollover. A completely loaded van has a 70 percent more chance of rolling over.

Also, the vans can rollover at a speed of only 40 miles per hour.

Christy Stephens, owner of U-Save Auto Rental in Jackson, says her company has rented 15-passenger vans since 1994 and has had no problems with them.

"I think if you put any vehicle on the road there is the scenario of some type of problem somewhere along the road," says Stephens. "I would venture to say that if you go back and pull up the records on the vehicles involved in these reported accidents, they are the older ones and those that haven't been serviced too good, too many people and too much baggage are on the vehicles or they are pulling something behind the vehicles."

Stephens says U-Save watches the tire pressure and properly maintains all of its vehicles. The company also uses new vehicles and provides safe-driving tips before renting vans.

Stephens is happy to report that she hasn't seen a decrease in the number of people renting 15-passenger vans. She has, however, seen a number of people take the back seats out of the vans.

"I think those concerned about safety issues should check their insurance carriers before purchasing or renting a van," says Stephens. "But if people keep the maintenance right and do not exceed the number of passengers allowed in the vehicle — 15 — I don't foresee any real problems.

"I don't know if someone is blowing the entire thing out of proportion or what," adds Stephens.