

Risk Reporter for Religious Institutions

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Mission accomplished: planning a safe trip

Mission trips often evoke thoughts of spirituality, service and camaraderie. However, without proper preparation, the risks associated with a trip can leave a lasting impact of abuse, injuries and emergency. Consider the following:

- During a mission trip to the Ukraine, a youth group member suffered alleged sexual *abuse* by a youth leader.
- A van used during a mission trip to Montana blew a tire. The ensuing accident killed two passengers and caused *injuries* for several others.
- A young boy fell three stories from a slippery balcony during a mission trip in Mexico, requiring *emergency* surgery.

These shocking but true incidents cover many different areas of mission trip planning and execution. Proper preparation can prevent some problems from happening and help your team respond to unexpected emergencies and events.

Pretrip planning

During the initial planning stages of a mission trip, it is important for congregations to consider several factors that influence the success of a trip.

“If a congregation is organizing a trip for the first time, they should consider working with a reputable mission trip association or another congregation with trip experience,” said Jayna Powell, consultant for The Volunteer Advantage and author of the book, “Get Dirty for Jesus.” Powell’s book is a comprehensive guide to planning local, national and worldwide religious work trips.

Consider the *purpose* of the mission trip, as well as location and logistics. Review your trip *finances* to assess fundraising needs and plan ahead for participant *training*.

Supervision

Supervision is important during travel, day activities and evening events, especially for younger participants. Requirements should reflect the size, age and skill level of your group.

Powell recommends the following guidelines:

- Middle school age participants: 1 adult leader to every 5 participants
- High school age participants: 1 adult leader to every 6 participants
- Adults: 1 adult leader to every 6 adults

Leader selection

Peggy Francour has two sons who have attended mission trips with their church in Merrill, Wis. She recommends organizations look within for adult leaders and chaperones.

“I personally chaperoned several mission trips,” Francour said. “I felt much more at ease once I attended a mission trip and was comfortable with the level of safety and supervision provided for my sons.”

“Organizations need to hand-pick their leaders,” Powell said. “There should be a formal application process and interview for each candidate. If possible, select at least one leader with medical training. Candidates should also be required to pass a background check.”

Trip preparation

“Group leaders, participants and guardians should be required to attend several pretrip meetings to cover training and details,” Powell said.

“Training specific to group leaders should include how to work with children and other participants, CPR and first aid, rules, safety issues and trip itinerary.”

Powell recommends that group meetings cover sensitivity training, team building exercises, cultural awareness and disaster issues, as well as mission trip basics such as:

Documents:

- Copies of passports, driver’s license, vaccination certification, medical/emergency forms and insurance information. Appoint one group leader to manage all paperwork, including an electronic copy kept on a jump drive or CD-ROM. In addition, leave a copy of all documents with someone at your congregation office.
- Require all participants to sign a permission slip and liability waiver.

Health:

- Check with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for health standards and immunization requirements for your destination and any stops you are planning on making.
- Require all participants to fill out medical forms listing medications, allergies and permission for necessary medical attention, as well as emergency contact information.
- Prepare and pack multiple first-aid kits.

Transportation

Mission trips often rely on the use of vehicles owned by the chaperones, as well as congregation-owned vehicles, for transportation.

Hired and nonowned vehicles

Automobile insurance coverage might fall short when personal, rented/chartered or

borrowed vehicles are used for mission trips. These types of vehicles are not covered under an organization's commercial auto policy. Adding hired and nonowned automobile liability insurance can help protect your worship center in the event of an accident.

Passenger vans

Many religious organizations use 15-passenger vans to transport large groups. However, this type of vehicle is at greater risk for accidents. Passenger vans are especially prone to rollovers, with most accidents caused by tire blowouts. Review the passenger van guidelines available in Church Mutual's [15-passenger van risk alert](#).

Driver selection

Selecting a qualified driver is crucial to passenger safety. Attitude, experience and physical condition should be considered, as well as the following driver qualifications:

- Age (minimum age of 25 is recommended)
- Driving record (Church Mutual customers are eligible to run a motor vehicle record check through ChoicePoint® for \$3.50)
- Possession of a commercial driver's license and experience operating larger vehicles (if the job requires driving a bus)

"Have enough adult drivers to trade off when driving long distances," Powell said. "Congregations could also consider chartering a bus that provides drivers for the trip."

Construction site safety

Mission trips involving a construction site present additional safety concerns. Select leaders with construction experience and qualifications. Licensed contractors should be used for specialized work, such as electrical and plumbing.

"Establish a written safety policy for the construction site," said Chris Clarke, senior vice president of communications for Habitat for Humanity International. "All participants should be briefed on safety practices prior to the mission and again when they arrive at the construction site."

Construction equipment tips

Electrical equipment

"Electrical equipment should not be used without proper instruction and supervision," Clarke said. "Power tools should only be operated by adults or responsible teenage volunteers with adult supervision." Never carry a power tool by its cord and always use a three-pronged plug.

Hand tools

"Always select the correct type and size of tool for the work and participant," Clarke said. "Do not use tools that are dull or in poor condition." Handle and carry tools with care; keep edged and pointed tools turned downward. Tools should be kept in safe containers.

Ladders

Inspect the ladder before each use, looking for wear, loose rungs and defects. Use a ladder at the proper height. An extension ladder should reach three feet above the work level. Use the "4-to-1" rule for extension ladders: For every 4 feet of height, move the

bottom of the ladder 1 foot away from the wall. Place the ladder on solid footing. Never use an aluminum ladder in the vicinity of electrical lines or outdoors during inclement weather or windy days.

Scaffolding

All scaffolding elevated 10 feet or more must be equipped with a safety railing. Scaffolds should support four times the weight of the workers and materials and must have a toeboard to prevent kicking tools or debris below. Scaffolds should only be assembled by people experienced with scaffolding.