



A Safe Church Bus & Van Ministry

At the combined youth group and parents meeting, plans are discussed for the upcoming summer mission trip. Support is solicited, including drivers for the trip. Surprisingly, more than enough parents sign up. The trip approaches and the five drivers are in place to take the youth group and their belongings in the three church vans on the 750 mile trip.

Joy and excitement abound as the group leaves the church parking lot. It should be a rewarding, uplifting week. However, five hours after the group departed, word came back that there was a terrible accident. One of the vans crashed when a tire blew out. There are fatalities and injuries.

After the horror of going through such an event begins to subside, the claim adjuster informs the church that the driver of the van had actually been involved in several accidents and was cited recently with a DUI and reckless operation of a motor vehicle. This farther, of one of the teens, over the past five years, had a rather long list of traffic violations.

The leadership of the church is left wondering how such a thing could have happened and what might have been done to prevent it.

Not every church owns vehicles. However, a growing number of churches have purchased or have had vehicles donated to their church. Some use the vehicles for special occasions. Other churches use them on a regular basis. Knowing how to operate your church vehicles in a safe manner, and knowing the driving records of your drivers, can often keep a tragedy from striking your congregation.

POLICIES

Every church, regardless of whether they own their own vehicles, should have a transportation policy. The written policy should be viewed as the best practices and procedures to be followed to create the safest program possible. The policies you put in place should be reviewed and revised regularly.

OVERSIGHT

The transportation 'buck' has to stop somewhere. It is not often logical that the pastor be responsible for the transportation program. In some churches, the church secretary is actually expected to run the program. Instead, a qualified individual or small team should be responsible for all of the areas covered in this MPM. Having people that will follow through with procedures, and be responsible, is critical to a successful transportation program.

DRIVERS

Before you consider taking any trips or pulling the first vehicle out of the lot, it's important to know who is getting behind the wheel. Remember, you trust this person not only to keep the passengers of the trip safe, but are also often placing the livelihood and future of the entire church ministry in their hands.

Ideally, a church should create a sufficient list of pre-approved drivers that cannot only cover trips, but be used as a fill-in or replacement driver. It's important to know who those drivers and what kind of driving records they have. The best way to do this is to ask them to fill out an application and then run a motor vehicle records (MVR) check on them.

Age considerations should also be a part of your policy. Many insurance policies request that drivers be between particular ages. Please check with your program administrator or annual conference office to determine if your auto policy states specific driving ages. Once you check all of the driver information, you can better select those drivers that will be the safest and most reliable.

Next, you will need to train the drivers. Too often a driver who is used to a small compact car, will be tossed the church van keys, with no training, and is expected to safely take a group on a long trip. Let's face it, vans and large vehicles do not handle like a small car. Therefore,

training and being certified on the vehicles they may be asked to drive, is essential for your drivers. Most people know that a Commercial Driving License (CDL) is mandated for vehicles that have a capacity of transporting over 15 people. Obviously, any state and federal licensing laws should be known and followed.

Prior to a trip, select your drivers from your list and also plan on having several backup drivers, in the event of a last minute change. Knowing ahead of time, who those drivers are, can save time and reduce the chances of selecting a driver that you do not know. You should always have a pre-trip briefing with drivers, to issue maps, discuss routes and emergencies, and make sure they have communication devices.

Additional information on vehicle policies can be found within the PACT Template Safety Manual, policy 21.

VEHICLE SELECTION

By now, most churches are aware of the dangers of 15 passenger vans. These vehicles, when loaded, may be prone to rollover accidents. Each year there are numerous accidents that claim the lives of children and church members. These vehicles, if used, should be operated safely. Many of your older 15 passenger vans should be phased out and replaced with a more save vehicle. Additional 15 passenger van safety information can be found in the MPM titled '15 Passenger Vans'.

Many churches have decided to utilize a mini bus or standard school bus. If you are going to use a standard school bus, it should be made after 1977, when safety standards were implemented. Also, if you use a mini bus, you should choose a multi function school activity bus (MFSAB) that is designed to meet or exceed the federal standards for safety. Not all mini buses or shuttles are created equal. Some were designed for local travel and not designed to be taken across the state or country.

Other vehicles are often selected by churches, such as smaller vans or large SUVs. The principle for these and all vehicles should be the same. Select the safest, most reliable vehicle you can possibly get. Even if it is a donated or inexpensive vehicle, safety should always be the main priority.

Each vehicle should have the necessary safety equipment and supplies needed. A first-aid kit and fire extinguisher should always be present. Other supplies

should be considered depending on the type of trip and the use of the vehicle.

INSPECTION AND MAINTENANCE

It is important to have every vehicle inspected before and after each trip. The driver should be doing a standard pre-trip inspection. The key is to determine that the safety equipment is working, that the tires are properly inflated, and that you have the equipment and supplies you need on board. However, a qualified mechanic should also be responsible for inspecting and maintaining your fleet of vehicles. Problems encountered on a trip should be reported by the driver, and the issue should be looked at and corrected, prior to the next trip.

Documentation is important to any church transportation program. Not only does it give you continuity, it is a plus should you ever have to go to court and respond to how diligent you were in maintaining your vehicles.

USAGE

The range of usage of vehicles by churches is broad. Some have vehicles that are seldom used; others use them on a daily basis. It is good to consider those uses and make sure you are prepared for them.

Vehicles that are parked for long periods of time have several issues. One is the tires. The tires can rot from prolonged lack of use, and develop a 'flat spot' on them, making them less safe. These vehicles can also be greater targets for vandalism.

Vehicles that are used frequently often suffer from mechanical problems. Those vehicles should have a more frequent inspection schedule. It is these vehicles that are most often used to pick up people for church, shuttle children, or offer transportation to those with special needs. Not only should you have a safe vehicle to transport them, but drivers should also be well trained as to how to load and unload passengers, and what specific issues require more attention.

Obviously, those drivers that transport children should also be screened. This should include a reference check, background screen, and MVR check. Highly desirable would be a second adult present on the trip. This can prevent any suspicion or chance of misconduct and also

allows the driver to focus on their primary task—driving safely.

Finally, passengers should also be informed of the guidelines expected during trips, both long and short. A pre-trip briefing for passengers can communicate these rules effectively.

INSURANCE

Finally, it is very important to know what role your insurance plays into the transportation program. Make sure you keep your program administrator informed of the vehicles you are operating and check to make sure your coverage is adequate. Remember to ask if there may be limits of coverage or restrictions that you need to know about.

Operating a church transportation ministry can be a valuable tool to support membership and reach out to the community. However, as we've sadly seen far too many times, a program that is not organized with policies that are clear and understood, can often lead to a tragedy. If your church has a ministry, which operates vehicles, operate them safely and with consistency. If you do, chances are you will remain safe, happy, and moving down the road!

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