

MISSION TRIP SAFETY

Mission trips can be a great personal journey in one's faith, a growing experience for groups of young adults and other volunteers, an opportunity to help others and spread discipleship as well as a revelation to the challenges and hardships faced by others. However, whether traveling to underserved areas within the U.S. or to impoverished cities in other countries, there are many dangers to consider when planning these meaningful visits. It is critical for religious organizations to understand the challenges and potential dangers associated with mission trips. Church leaders may consider the following recommendations to help make mission trips safer.

PLANNING A SAFE TRIP

Planning Considerations

Before planning begins, it is important to have written guidelines for each trip to help organize the planning process. Adequate planning and preparation for each mission trip can help limit avoidable and predictable risks. It is recommended that there be a committee in place to evaluate mission opportunities and preplan the trips. Whether the church has several mission trips a year or only plans a trip on an occasional basis, more time spent on preparation means less chance of issues arising.

It is important to decide which church leaders will need to approve the trip plans and to prepare a written proposal for each trip to submit for approval. Along with the specified trip activities and expectations, leaders may consider including the following items in their trip proposals.

Destination

To ensure the trip will be safe for mission travelers and to lessen the



possibility of surprise dangers for the group, leaders must adequately research the mission trip destination. Consider possible health risks, economic and political dangers and cultural norms. For trips to foreign countries, be sure to research issues such as immunization, laws and customs.

As a first-step in planning any trip abroad, religious organizations should check the State Department [Travel Advisories](#) for their intended destination. Travel Advisories use established risk indicators and issue specific advice to U.S. citizens

who chose to travel to destinations abroad. These risk indicators include crime, terrorism, civil unrest, health, natural disaster, time-limited events and other potential risks.

Leadership

It is also important to designate those who will lead the mission trip. Ideally, the leader of a mission trip should have significant experience in mission work and travel. For larger mission trips, there may be an identified mission leadership team. For mission trips that involve a number of underage, minor children/teenagers, there should

be identified chaperone ratios. All adults should have criminal background and abuse registry checks.

Transportation

For trips within the continental U.S., transportation is often the biggest risk. It is important to establish whether travel will be in personal vehicles, a church owned van or through a third party transportation company. In any of these travel arrangements, leadership must obtain verification of a clean motor vehicle record and evidence of a current driver's license. For extended road trips, it is essential to have time built in for the driver to rest or to arrange for drivers to be exchanged.

Communication

Consider a variety of communication tools and methods in advance of the trip. Certain mission locations might not have cell phone or internet access at all, making the mission participants isolated in the event of an emergency. If there is internet access, the religious organization might be able to allow more congregation participation in the mission experience through a live streaming app, such as Skype.

Traveler Requirements

Specify the traveler requirements in

the trip proposal, such as age, health and experience. It is also critical to outline the documents travelers must provide prior to the trip; and consider requirements that travelers receive a physical examination from their physician at least six weeks before the trip to ensure their health, including any needed immunizations and prescriptions.

Not all volunteers may be suited as a traveler for a foreign mission trip. Consider the location of the mission. Certain countries may require special immunizations, making it more difficult for a traveler with existing health issues, whereas travel within the U.S. might not be a problem.

Emergency Plans

It is imperative to develop an emergency-preparedness plan for a number of potential emergencies including natural disasters that impact travel, security or terrorism emergencies at the mission location, medical emergencies, missing participants and communication failures such as lack of phone or internet service. Designate a contact person, not on the trip, who will communicate between the church, the travelers and their family members. Additionally, all mission trip participants should sign a waiver and have training.

Using a third party tour company is another consideration that may help to manage an emergency better should one occur. Use of a tour company allows the organization to "share the risk." Additionally, these companies typically have contacts within the countries that they plan travel to, which may be beneficial.

Trip Insurance

In some instances, churches may want to consider purchasing extra insurance for the mission trip. A travel policy, particularly for trips that are outside the U.S., may be helpful in covering items such as medical expense benefits, emergency medical expenses, emergency medical evacuation and repatriation.

Conclusion

Safety considerations must be taken for all mission trips, including trips in and out of the country. It is important to recognize the possible risks involved with mission trips and to prepare for those risks in advance of any trip.

Contact your insurance agent or broker about a Mission Travel Accident Package available through [Glatfelter Specialty Benefits](#).