

A church depends on the valuable contributions of its members to do God's ministry: donating professional expertise, driving people who need assistance, organizing outreach events, participating in mission trips, and so much more! Churches rely on the beautiful spirit of its congregation to willingly contribute their time, energy, and resources. Without volunteers, only a fraction of this work would occur. Such is the reality of a church. Volunteers are their lifeline.

Participating in church activities gives people a sense of community. Mission trips are one of the most fulfilling aspects of volunteering for many people. The trips can be short or long, domestic or international. It is important to consider the following guidelines, particularly when minors are included on mission trips or overnight activities:

Send trained staff and volunteers. It is in the church's best interest to send trained and experienced people to manage a mission trip, especially if minors are participating. A criminal background check and reference checks should be mandatory. Everyone should know your organization's abuse prevention policies and procedures. Familiarity with the destination should also be a factor. Specific physical requirements of the mission trip should be properly communicated in advance. Health and property insurance should be verified (participant illness and personal belongings are not covered under the church's insurance policy).

Supervision of youth always comes first. Minors may not be responsible for their acts, laws may impose financial responsibility on their parents as well as the church. Chaperones who are doubling as a participant on a mission trip should make the safety and well-being of youth their top priority.

Advance knowledge of sleeping and bathroom facilities. Mission trips may require lodging in various standard and improvised lodging arrangements, from hotels and camp cabins, to "camping out" in a school gym or church hall. Trip organizers should plan how to manage these situations to protect the safety and well-being of the youth. Leaders must be prepared to oversee feeding, bathing, and sleeping arrangements of minors. Consulting with camp managers in your area may help you prepare.

Document each participant's assumption of risk with signatures. Illness, accident, lack of medical care, and even terrorism are all a potential risk. Thoroughly explain the known risks to all participants (parents of minors).

Proper paperwork. Request a signed indemnity and release form from all participants. The leader should have vital paperwork/information on each participant: copies of passports/visas, photos and emergency contacts, medical release forms, list of medications, insurance information, and itineraries.

Consent form for minors authorizing a person to make medical decisions if the parent/guardian cannot be reached.

MISSION TRIPS & VOLUNTEERS

CPR certification. It is highly recommended that more than one person be certified in CPR. Additionally, more than one person should be able to converse in the language of the destination should a medical emergency arise.

Health insurance considerations. Many domestic health insurance policies do not cover medical expenses in a foreign country, so additional insurance for each traveler is required. Participants should buy a travel insurance policy that covers both hospitalization and medical care (in case of illness or accident) as well as evacuation/transport services. Insurance Board offers both a global and domestic travel accident policy for members or volunteers to purchase if they do not have another option.

Driving record check. If the volunteers are driving on the trip, you should check each person's driving record. Ask for proof of insurance. Many people incorrectly believe if the volunteer is not driving a church-owned vehicle, then the church is not responsible. Know the laws of the destination country to determine if you need local auto insurance. If you do not secure appropriate coverage, the church will be at risk, and the volunteer may have a serious legal issue with local authorities.

Contact CDC. Contact the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to learn health precautions related to your destination and determine which vaccinations are required. The World Health Organization (WHO) provides details on types of risks and outbreaks. Request information on risk, prevention, and appropriate preventive medications. Make sure all participants have this information.

Research water safety. Know whether the local water will be safe to drink. If not, have a plan for how to provide safe drinking water for participants.

Establish responsibility with host organization. When collaborating with other organizations in mission activities away from home, the host organization should be clearly and contractually in charge of the mission activity. Your church must endorse and subscribe to the safety routines of the host as a minimum. In some situations, you may wish to shift risk to the host through a contract, or your church may have individual participants apply or enroll with the host organization.

Time and again, mission trip participants gain a bigger perspective of God's Kingdom through their involvement in service experiences; it is our responsibility to keep them safe on these awesome adventures.