



Dangers of Distracted Driving – Church Vehicles

As a church, an important part of your organization's job is keeping your members safe and secure, which may include transportation to and from church events. Many churches today have purchased church vehicles, such as small buses or 15-passenger vans, to help members of their congregation get to church services, mission trips, camps or other church-related events. Many times, a member of the staff or a volunteer will be enlisted to drive. Sometimes, if the group is small enough, members of the church will volunteer to use their own vehicle to transport other congregation members. In either situation, the driver is responsible for keeping themselves focused on the road and free from distractions, such as other passengers, the radio, a cell phone or Blackberry, food, drink, drowsiness or anything else that has the potential to pull a driver's eyes from the road.

No matter what the situation, the hazards of distracted driving can be life threatening to everyone inside of the vehicle. Training both church staff and volunteers on the potential dangers that distractions can cause could go a long way in keeping the congregation safe.

Cell Phones and Smartphones

The Virginia Tech Transportation Institute reported cell phones are the most common distraction for drivers. Several states have banned cell phone usage by drivers, while others that haven't are regulating text messaging while driving. Below are some frightening statistics on what can happen when you use your cell phone while operating a vehicle:

- Using a cell phone quadruples your risk of being involved in an accident;
- Two-thirds of drivers between the ages of 18 and 34, and 53 percent of drivers between the ages of 45 and 54, have reported using a cell phone while driving;
- 95 percent of drivers believe texting is unacceptable when driving, but 18 percent of those polled also had read or sent a text in the last month while driving;
- 80 percent of cell phone users talk on their phones while driving;
- 70 percent of smartphone and BlackBerry owners use their devices on the road at least once per week;
- Four in 10 drivers in 2008 reported they had been hit or nearly hit by someone using a cell phone behind the wheel;
- Fatal crashes linked to distracted drivers have increased from eight percent in 2004 to 11 percent in 2008; and
- A study conducted by the University of Utah concluded that cell phone users exhibited greater impairment behind the wheel than intoxicated drivers.

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This material is for informational purposes only. It is not intended to give specific legal or risk management advice, nor are any suggested checklists or actions plans intended to include or address all possible risk management exposures or solutions. You are encouraged to retain your own expert consultants and legal advisors in order to develop a risk management plan specific to your own activities. For more information, contact the GuideOne Center for Risk Management at (877) 448-4331, ext. 5118 for Church and Schools, or ext. 5175 for Senior Living Communities.

It is recommended that churches establish a policy that drivers for church-related activities be prohibited from using cell phones while driving. Instead, if they must make a call they should pull over at a rest stop or wait until they have reached their destination to make a call or send a text. Another option would be to designate another person in the vehicle to handle any cell phone communications during the trip so that the driver can continue to focus on the road ahead. Studies have shown that even using hands-free phone devices while driving poses just as high of a risk as holding a cell phone in your hand.

Eating and Drinking

Many churches participate in youth camps or mission trips, which are oftentimes many miles from your church and require extended travel time in a vehicle. These situations may result in the driver eating their meals or snacking while behind the wheel. While this may seem like the best way to get everyone home as quickly as possible, in reality, drivers are one and a half times as likely to crash while eating. For example, during one church outing, a passenger offered a cookie to the driver. When the driver turned to accept the cookie, he lost control of the vehicle and it went down an embankment and overturned. Two people were seriously injured in the accident.

It is recommended that churches establish a policy prohibiting drivers from eating or drinking beverages while driving on church-related activities.

Navigating the Road

Knowing where you are and where you are going is an important part of your driving responsibilities. However, taking your eyes off the road to read a map or check directions can potentially cause you to be in an accident. For example, a minister making a pastoral visit was en route reading a map trying to find his location. He took his eyes off the road and struck the vehicle in front of him, which had stopped. That vehicle, in turn, struck the vehicle in front of it, injuring the four passengers, a mother and her three children. The pastor and the church were sued for those injuries.

Drivers for church-related events should become familiar with their route before they leave for the trip. Entering destination information into a global positioning satellite (GPS) unit should be completed before departing. En route, if assistance with maps, directions or the GPS unit is needed, designate another person in the vehicle as the navigator so that the driver can focus his or her full attention on the road. If the driver is alone, he or she should find a safe place to exit the roadway in order to check the map or directions while the vehicle is parked.

Fighting Drowsiness

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that at least 100,000 police-reported automobile accidents are caused by driver fatigue each year. Driver distraction by drowsiness can have the same effects as driver intoxication, including slower reaction time, reduced vigilance, and deficits in information processing.

To combat the risk of driver fatigue, make sure that church drivers are well-rested before beginning a trip. Consider making rest stops every two to three hours. And, limit the maximum number of hours that a single driver can operate a vehicle in a day to eight to 10 hours. If additional driving time is needed, make sure that a rested, second driver is available.

Controlling Passengers

The passengers themselves can serve as a distraction to the driver by their behavior in the vehicle. Before a trip begins, particularly where children and youth are involved, guidelines should be reviewed about passengers remaining in their seats at all times with seat belts fastened, no horseplay in the vehicle, no shouting or excessive noise, and no distracting the driver with their words or actions. If assistance is needed in correcting or controlling youthful passengers, a second adult in the vehicle should be designated in advance to serve in that role.

By having these rules in place before beginning the trip, the driver will be better able to maintain his or her focus on the road.

Safety First

Practicing safe, undistracted driving significantly reduces your chances of being in a crash or near-crash on the road. Driving already requires a person to multi-task, needing the mind and body to work together to operate the vehicle. Adding on other tasks will only greatly increase your chance of being involved in a dangerous situation. Drivers of church vehicles have been handed an important task – to transport members of the congregation to a church ministry or activity and return them safely – and this responsibility should not be taken lightly. It is imperative to remember to drive without distractions, as it is the best way to reduce your potential for accidents.