

Short-Term Team Safety Preparation

by Steve Vereb

Lessons Learned the Hard Way

In 2004, our church sent a team of youth to Kenya. During the trip, the team was van-jacked, driven to the bush, and harassed. Some were hit and beaten, and all were robbed of their passports, valuables, and money.

As a church, we did not handle the situation well, either before they went or after they came home. A risk assessment would have told us that the most common crime in Kenya's major cities, and in particular Nairobi, is car-jacking, but our team was unaware of the danger.

Many short-termers travel with the idea that every country has the same level of professionalism in police, fire, and emergency services that they depend on back home. They assume that their protection and the resolution of any problem they might encounter there are primary concerns in host countries to which they travel. Not only is their wellbeing often not a priority, but they are easy targets. We need to prepare teams to go armed with prayer, awareness, and common sense. With proper preparation, we can prevent many potential dilemmas. Due diligence is the operative phrase.

What happened with our Kenya team? The group stopped at a gas station for fuel. Everyone got out and went into the store for something to eat and drink. Hijackers followed the team from the store, forced them into the van, and drove to a deserted location where they were beaten and robbed. The team reported the incident to our church but decided to stay in Kenya and finish the last four days of their trip. When they finally returned home, they arrived on a different flight than scheduled, and the church elders who planned to meet them at the airport were not there. Although not completely left alone, the team felt abandoned, with many more questions than answers about what had happened. In the long-term aftermath, one youth team member entered residential psychiatric care for several months and another adult team

member suffered through traumatic stress for years after the incident.

As a church we learned a lot from what we did and didn't do, and we established guidelines to reduce the risk for future teams. Could we have guaranteed prevention of this crisis? No, of course not, no more than we could absolutely prevent someone from getting mugged in any major US city. But could we as a church have warned the team of the local circumstances and the possibility of a crime problem so that they would be more vigilant, and have taken steps to handle this crisis? Yes, and that is what we do now. Sadly, it took a traumatic crime to stimulate the genesis of our church's crisis management policy and team training program.



Church-Based Crisis Management

Short-term teams face a variety of potential risks. Automobile and other accidents, serious illnesses, natural catastrophes, violent crime, political unrest, imprisonment, and terrorism head the list.

The first thing we did to prepare for future crises was to look for other churches from whom we could learn. We quickly discovered that few churches were proactively addressing safety issues for short-term teams. Some valuable input was provided by New Tribes Mission and Crisis Consulting International, both of which have extensive experience in crisis management for professional missionaries. What we could not find was a comprehensive program for risk mitigation and crisis prevention focused at the church level.

The next two years became a bittersweet experience of formulating and developing our church's program from the ground up. We developed a policy of how we want to do missions as a church, a risk-mitigation protocol, and a crisis management protocol. We also developed training programs for both leaders and members of our short-term teams.

Here are some basic steps every church should consider.

Evaluate Risk in the Destination Area

Part of risk mitigation is appropriately vetting your trip destinations. We recently declined to send trips to Kenya and cancelled a youth trip to Ecuador. The decision to cancel the Ecuador trip was not a popular decision even though the group was redirected to another destination. The trip was to focus on street evangelism and when we explained that the US Embassy had warned that American citizens should keep a low profile in Ecuador, most people, but not all, understood the risk and the need for a change of venue.

Part of our vetting process is to prepare a risk assessment on each trip destination with a numerical score indicating the risk level. We have designed a risk assessment matrix that grades a county/destination on different areas including political climate, overall crime, crime against American tourists, health services, emergency services, communications, road conditions, and several other areas.

These evaluations are prepared by experienced, professional evaluators who also have short-term missions experience. Individual scores in each of these areas are tallied to provide a country score with a matching warning: (1) travel with common sense safety, (2) travel with caution, or (3) consider postponing travel. For youth trips, our church policy lowers the threshold for postponing a trip. In the case of Ecuador, the numerical value exceeded our policy for the safe level for youth teams.

Sometimes a survey trip to a new area is needed to provide first-hand risk evaluation. If your group works with a missionary, his/her input will be very important, although long-term workers are usually better prepared for, and more comfortable in, higher risk situations than what may be wise for short-term teams. Said another way, long-term workers and especially national contacts can be so used to higher risk situations that they may be almost complacent to what we would consider danger. Our policy gives the missions pastor the final go/no-go authority. In the case of the Ecuador trip, based on the assessment and circumstances, he decided to redirect the trip.

Prepare a risk assessment on each trip destination.



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This process in no way discounts the sovereignty of a supreme God who has control of everything. Jesus started his human life on the run when Joseph responded to a dream and took his family to Egypt. He returned not to Jerusalem but to Galilee when Joseph responded to another dream. Our Ecuadorean trip was shifted to Brazil, and participants reported later that it was a “God experience,” making it vividly apparent they were meant to minister there.

Establish a Crisis Management Team

The next step we took as a result of our Kenyan team experience was to develop a crisis management team (CMT) to handle future crises. Yes, we expect another incident. I recently saw an insurance billboard which said 1 in 8 people will experience a vehicle accident, and such accidents are the number one cause of injury on the mission field. Based on these statistics alone, the chances are high we will experience another situation in which we will need to respond to some type of danger. We now have a fully functional CMT in place.

Last year a team from a nearby church was arrested and detained by local police in a Central Asian nation. I happened to be in the same country and found out about the arrests via a phone call from my wife in the US. Her information was coming through emails from someone in a different state sending out prayer requests.

This indirect information flow created a preventable “secondary crisis” for the sending church. The spouse of one of the team members heard of the arrest via one of those emails rather than from a church representative. Such mistakes can sometimes be harder to rectify than the original crisis, and may affect long-term relationships between people and churches. When crises are mishandled, a number of secondary issues may overshadow the original problem.

Had this arrest occurred with one of our teams in 2007 and had they followed their training, the team leader would have called the CMT and briefed them on the situation and what was anticipated. According to predefined procedures, the

CMT would then have contacted the families, advised them of the facts, and taken appropriate actions.

The good news is that the team which was arrested was held for about 12 hours and then released unharmed. They



left the country as soon as they could schedule a flight, which is what our 2004 Kenyan team should have done.

Train All Team Members and Leaders

The third step we took was to begin a standardized training program for every short-term team and team leader, including a mandatory session on risk assessment and crisis management. During this training,

we present common-sense steps to increase vigilance and awareness. We also address issues such as driving in foreign countries. (For example, did you know that with the possible exception of Canada, most American auto insurance is worthless outside of the US? In many Majority World countries, the driver of a vehicle involved in a fatal accident will likely be jailed until responsibility is determined, which could take months.)

We also discuss other practical issues such as safe drinking water and contact with animals. The sessions introduce our crisis management program and the basic steps the CMT would take in a crisis setting. Teams are instructed that if there is a crisis, contact and information should flow only between the team leader (or designee) and the CMT. Our CMT then has specific procedures to deal with situations as they arise so that everyone who needs to know about a crisis will be given the information.

We have decided that cell phones, text messaging, and emails will not be used by other team members in a crisis. In fact, we suggest restricting the carrying of cell phones on trips, as they can become a distraction. We encourage each team leader/co-leader to take a cell phone and a satellite phone, especially to Majority World countries. The satellite phone is the most reliable means of communication if there is a crisis, including natural disasters which might disable cell phone or internet access.

What can you learn from our experiences? First, appropriate research and vetting need to be done on countries before sending teams. Second, churches and organizations sending short-term teams need to be adequately prepared to handle crises when they occur; and they will occur.

Third, teams need to be educated as part of their pre-trip preparation on what to expect, how to avoid trouble situations, and what to do in the event a crisis occurs.

Two Plumb Lines

Our church strives to strike a balance between two key principles: *It's not about safety, it's about ministry, and There are no prizes for being a risk-taker.*

◀ We present common-sense steps to increase vigilance and awareness. ▶

Apply those guidelines and take some of our advice, and you and your church will be better prepared for short-term ministry in today's world.



Steve Vereb, executive director of Vereb, Hitt and Associates, LLC, along with his partner, Crawford Hitt, draw from their extensive background in missions work, law enforcement, and security to prepare churches for short-term missions. They provide written, country-specific risk assessments, and offer training in short-term team risk management, crisis management policy, and crisis management team development, as well as church safety. For more information go to www.verebhitt.com.

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