

POSTINGS

articles for missions mobilizers



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Expect the Unexpected

*Are you prepared
for a crisis?*

As our world becomes more dangerous, what is the riskiest thing your church's missions leaders can do? The greatest risk is failing to prepare for a serious emergency because you assume it could happen to others but not to your missionary or short-term team.

No church can ever anticipate, let alone prevent, every possible catastrophe, nor should they try. But putting a plan in place now and knowing what protocols have been adopted by your partnering agency can help you react with greater wisdom in an emergency.

▶ One church sent a short-term team to a “safe” region of Africa. Then the van carrying their entire team was hijacked. The church had no plan in place to deal with this crisis on the other side of the world.

▶ Another church’s missionary couple in Asia was robbed at gunpoint in their apartment. They needed immediate support to help them cope with the trauma. The missions pastor found himself on a plane totally unprepared to deal with the crisis confronting him when he arrived in Asia.

▶ Yet a third church had a college team in a relatively safe country when the US State Department suddenly increased their travel advisory status to a level 4—do not travel. The local hosts assured the church that they were fine and safe, but parents started calling the missions pastor. Fortunately, the church had access to professional security advice that helped them evaluate the situation and implement a good course of action.

Have you considered how you would respond if something like this happened to your worker or team? The truth is that it’s more likely a matter of “when” a crisis will happen rather than “if.” The best advice? Don’t wait to get prepared.

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No church is so large or so small that they can’t have, or don’t need to have, basic emergency-response guidelines in place.

Accidents occur in the blink of an eye. So do kidnappings, floods, political coups, heart attacks, mental health emergencies, and a host of other disasters. They happen to missionaries and teams that serve in their own country or on the other side of the globe; they happen even when all the right precautions have been taken.

Should an emergency arise involving a member of your congregation serving in a missions capacity, your church could be catapulted within minutes or hours into the unfamiliar terrain of making potentially life-and-death decisions, relating to sometimes hysterical family members, and dealing with a barrage of media cameras and aggressive reporters. If you wait until a crisis happens, it will be too late to organize a

well-prepared response team and establish protocols.

From what might be considered the first missionary crisis—Paul’s shipwreck in the Mediterranean—to recent events such as the kidnapping of a van of Mennonite missionaries in Haiti, missions has involved risk. Doing God’s will does not guarantee His servants will be protected from harm. “Counting the cost” means taking reasonable risks but also planning carefully to do what we can to prevent problems and deal with any crisis that may arise.

Here are some simple steps that any church can put into place.

1. Research agency crisis preparedness. When your potential long-term worker is selecting an agency, make sure you find out how the agency has prepared for a serious crisis that would involve your missionary. Many agencies have contracted with [Crisis Consulting](#)

International for professional assistance in handling a serious international crisis. The CCI professionals are available 24/7 to handle complex situations anywhere in the world.

A responsible agency will also have worked with their leaders on each field to develop carefully considered crisis-response plans that include emergency evacuation, on-site crisis assessment and counseling, a communication plan, etc. Your church will also want to find out what financial resources the agency has set aside for emergencies that can quickly run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. Request the 24/7 access information for the agency's emergency contact person. The agency's planning, or lack thereof, will also impact any short-term team you send to work with your missionary should a crisis arise.

If your church sends individuals or a short-term team to work with national partners in a context where there is no Western agency responsible for them, realize that your church then assumes much more responsibility for handling any emergency that should come up. Planning becomes even more critical in such situations.

2. Appoint a crisis management team and adopt protocols.

This **sample plan** suggests key members to include on a crisis management team (CMT) and some protocols to consider. An important note: Your congregation may include people with training in crisis assessment and response, such as first responders and those with military experience. Recognize that their expertise in emergency preparedness can be a very valuable asset to the CMT, but they and others in your church may believe that all risk should be avoided. Other congregation members may hold an opposite view, believing that in missions endeavors God's people should ignore risks and just trust Him. Defining a course for your church that balances these two views will require prayerful discussions. This is another reason to plan ahead and not wait until a crisis occurs.

3. Inform team members and family members of your guidelines.

Make sure that all short-term team leaders and participants as well as their families know who is responsible in the event of a crisis and what procedures will be followed. Recognize that compliance is impossible

to enforce, but emphasize that following established protocols is important for the safety of the team. One of the most difficult guidelines is asking the team and family members to refrain from posting information on social media or giving information to the media, but this is especially critical in international crises such as a hijacking.

4. Purchase emergency evacuation insurance and register with your government.

Emergency evacuation is seldom needed, but when it is, the costs can quickly top \$100,000. Insurance is relatively inexpensive and can

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be purchased just for the length of the trip. Ask your travel agent for a recommendation.

The US State Department has a Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) which makes it possible for the government to alert travelers if there is some security concern while they are abroad. Other countries have similar programs. It is wise for your government to know you are traveling in case the embassy in that country needs to reach you.

5. Collect emergency contact information.

Maintain updated emergency contact names and phone numbers for all of your sent workers, and make sure that emergency information is provided for anyone traveling on behalf of your church. If you are sending a team outside your country, also have a copy of each person's passport and complete itinerary with phone contact information. Remember that the emergency may be something involving a family member here at home that results in an urgent need to inform your global worker or team member of what has happened. All contact information should be immediately available to the CMT.

6. Establish a contingency fund.

Every church needs a contingency fund that can be tapped quickly for costs not covered by the agency or any insurance. In a crisis, you will be dealing with many emergency issues; having a contingency fund will mean that “Where will we get the money?” isn’t one more hurdle to overcome when time is of the essence. For instance, when a crisis occurs, your church may immediately need to put one or more people on a plane to provide on-site counsel or assistance. These last-minute tickets may be very costly.

7. Teach your congregation biblical principles related to risk and safety precautions.

Many Western Christians today believe that being in God’s will guarantees safety and security, often repeating the statement that “There’s no place safer than the center of God’s will.” Yet the lives of God’s choicest servants—both those in Scripture and those who have served Him in the last two millennia of church history—provide abundant evidence that such sentiments are blatantly false.

When we challenge the “principalities and powers” of this evil world (Eph. 6:12), we enter a real battle and real danger. We must act neither foolishly nor fearfully. Our congregations need to be challenged to pray that their leaders and missionaries will have godly discernment in where they go and where they send people, then pray for God’s protection and His guidance should a crisis occur.



How should your church respond to an emergency? Every situation is unique, so giving specific advice here would be unhelpful and unwise. However, implementing in advance the suggestions in this article will allow your Crisis Management Team to be prepared to react quickly while relying on the Holy Spirit to know what to do in the unique context of that particular crisis.

Peter charges church leaders to “shepherd the flock of God” (1 Pt. 5:2) and that includes the people they send to serve. As good shepherds, have you prepared adequately to care for your “sent sheep” in the event of a crisis? Don’t wait!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



Going Prepared: A unique church-based approach to crisis prevention for short-term mission teams by Lee Jacobs and Steve Vereb. The only extended treatment of this issue that we are aware of.



[Crisis Consulting International](#) provides some model policies designed primarily for agencies but which can be helpful for local churches, especially if sending residential workers.



The Mission Trip to San Pedro 2 by Gordon Jackson. Want to read a fun, fictional account of a missions trip gone bad? Enjoy this short novel about all the things that could go wrong!

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