Most likely you weren’t selected to be a leader in youth ministry because you had a reputation for being safety conscious. You were selected because kids like you or because you know how to have a good time while communicating the gospel. But everyone connected with your youth ministry is quietly counting on you to run a safe program and take care of their kids.

It’s OK to admit that safety is not one of your major concerns or strengths as a leader. The fact that you are reading this shows your willingness to learn how you can grow as a youth leader who understands safety concerns.

Let’s be honest. Safety is a background concern. It’s like being an offensive lineman in football. No one notices anything you do until a defensive player gets by you to slam the quarterback into the ground. Then all eyes focus on you, and everyone asks why you didn’t do your job. Learn this lesson now. People will seldom discuss safety with you until something goes wrong or someone gets hurt. Unfortunately, learning your lesson then won’t get a kid out of a wheelchair or bring someone back from the grave.

Think Ahead
You don’t want to see anyone get hurt, so you need to invest the time to think ahead and to plan a response to possible dangerous situations. It takes initiative. It’s proactive, not reactive. This investment also requires money and people. The student of safety rejects the shortcut approach. It’s worth the money to purchase quality equipment and hire skilled people to provide expertise for training and medical response.

The student of safety is constantly improving his or her ability to assess risk and danger. That ability is gained only through experience. You can learn vicariously by reading true stories and listening to others. Or you can learn through real-life experiences, packing away knowledge for future use every time.

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you lead a youth activity or trip. You hope and pray to learn all the vital safety lessons without seeing young people lose their health or their lives.

Developing this risk-assessment skill is like learning to drive a car. If you’re smart, you start cautiously, learning to control and stop the car. The fools and the reckless hit the accelerator and think about how to stop safely only when it’s too late and the damage is done. It’s not a sin to err on the side of caution. Every activity and event you lead should broaden your safety and ministry experience and equip you for more demanding opportunities.

**LEARN SAFETY PRINCIPLES**

Every student of safety can master the following general safety principles and apply them in varied settings.

**MATCH YOUR SUPERVISION LEVEL** to the type of activity you’re leading. The higher the risk, the greater the supervision required. Weekly meetings in the church youth room may require a 1-to-15 adult leader-to-student ratio, but a weekend hike in the wilderness probably needs a 1-to-4 ratio. Raking leaves at the home of a senior citizen may require a 1-to-10 ratio, while handing out bag lunches to the homeless in an inner city setting may call for a 1-to-2 ratio.

**UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENCE** between perceived danger and real danger. You can keep the atmosphere of fun and excitement in your youth program if you sponsor activities that look and feel dangerous but that are, in fact, quite safe. A ropes course (walking a single wire 20 feet off the ground) is both terrifying and thrilling to most kids. In reality, the ever-present safety lines and high-quality supervision of a well maintained and well run ropes course make this a safe experience. On the other hand, most adults and students feel relaxed and complacent about safety around water when, in fact, the danger is much higher than they might suspect.

**PLAN FOR** the worst case scenario. Before an event, discuss potential problem situations. For example, as you train counselors and drivers for the winter retreat, ask them what they would do if their van (with 10 students aboard) were separated from the rest of the caravan and developed engine problems. If they were 10 miles from the nearest town, it was nighttime, and it was 5 degrees above zero, how would they handle the situation? Or when you train leaders for your summer bike trip, ask what they would do if they realized they had made a wrong turn on the route and were 10 miles from the destination. What should they do if it’s almost dark? Help them think through the options and

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**THE TOP 10 SAFETY SINS OF YOUTH MINISTRY**

1. Not enough staff.
2. Too many kids in the vehicle.
3. No time to plan for safety.
4. No plan of action to respond to an emergency.
5. Student driving.
6. No use of seat belts.
7. No first aid training or supplies.
8. Inadequate paperwork (proper permission/medical forms).
9. Letting a dangerous activity continue (afraid to stop it).
10. Lack of careful supervision (letting kids wander or play around with equipment).

Which of these safety sins are present in your youth ministry?
prepare them to make decisions when real-life events occur.

**LEARN TO RECOGNIZE** the initial signs of danger. Great athletes have the ability to anticipate what their opponents are going to do next. Responding more quickly than their foes can act, they gain the victory. The safety-smart youth leader anticipates danger. If kids are chicken-fighting (riding on each other’s shoulders) in the small swimming pool, can you see the probable landing spot for the head of the student riding on top when he or she falls? What are the signs of young people becoming angry during a competitive game and possibly using excess force during the next round? Recognizing the initial signs of danger gives the youth leader the advantage and opportunity to intervene before the accident happens.

**KEEP IN MIND** the special interests of your group. Learn to make safety decisions according to the particular needs of the kids in your group. If you take your group on a Follow the Leader exercise through the park, you may jump over a wrought-iron fence without realizing that down the line is an overweight student who could be injured trying to get over the fence. Likewise, pitting smaller junior high kids against senior highers in a game with heavy physical contact usually brings trouble.

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**IT CAN HAPPEN TO YOU**

An Interview With Jack Crabtree

Four years after the publication of his book *Better Safe Than Sued*, Jack Crabtree finds youth workers making many of the same mistakes that he warned against.

“The worst mistake that they make is that many youth workers say, ‘This won’t happen to me,’ ” said Crabtree, executive director of Long Island Youth for Christ, in a telephone interview with The Deacon’s Bench. “That’s the number one mistake, that they almost dismiss either evaluating carefully what it is that they’re doing or listening to correction, because it is overridden by this opinion that if nothing bad has happened to us yet, it won’t happen to us.”

An example of how this works, Crabtree said, is when a youth worker gets into a van and realizes that two of the ten teens in the vehicle aren’t wearing seat belts. The youth worker doesn’t enforce the seat belt rule, rationalizing that “I’m not going to drive that fast, and nothing is going to happen.”

Another problem, Crabtree said, is that people in youth ministry often don’t take time to learn from their mistakes. Fortunately, he said, most accidents aren’t serious, but “instead of using that opportunity to talk about it, people miss that moment and go on and repeat that same mistake again.”

Learning from other people’s mistakes is a good way to prevent them, but this often doesn’t happen, either. For example, Crabtree devoted a good deal of attention to sexual misconduct in his book, and it’s received widespread media attention in recent years, but the problem persists in youth ministries.

The way to prevent such disasters, Crabtree advised, is to avoid gray areas, such as sexual jokes with teens or back rubs with teens of the opposite sex. “We need to say to our staff workers and to our youth workers, ‘You can’t be talking sexually to our kids, and you can’t be having that kind of contact with them,’ ” he said.

Crabtree said if he were writing his book today, he’d devote even more attention to this issue. He said he’d also focus on safety concerns with vans, based on “the recent reports that have come out concerning 15-passenger vans and their tendency to turn over when overloaded and driving at high speeds and having sudden change of direction and sudden swerving.”

In the four years since his book was published, Crabtree said, there’s been a great deal of awareness of safety concerns with youth ministry and lots of positive change. However, he said, “every generation needs to be re-educated. You can’t ever sit back with education and say, ‘We’ve done our job. It’s all done.’ ”

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Jack Crabtree is executive director of Long Island Youth for Christ and has been on the staff of the organization since 1971. He is former Mid Atlantic coordinator of the National Network of Youth Ministries and a member of Central Presbyterian Church in Huntington, NY.
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**TEST IT FIRST.** Bring your great idea to life with a simulated run, using your staff as “crash test dummies.” As you play, you’ll be able to identify the danger points and modify your idea before you present it to the youth group.

**RESIST THE SHORTCUTS.** Recognize the forces that pressure you to short-circuit your safety plans. When you’re running late, you’ll tend to skip checking the fluids in the van or the connections on the ropes course. People will forget permission slips, first aid kits, and other important safety matters. Don’t let their “problem” pressure you to break the important rules of safety.

**WHY PARENTS SUE**

- **Surprise!** The parents had no idea that their kids would be doing the activity in which they were injured.
- **Lack of communication.** When the youth leader seems unavailable or uncooperative in providing information about an event or after a young person has been injured, the parents’ anger rises.
- **Wrong decisions.** If parents feel that the leaders made a mistake in planning or allowing a certain activity, they might sue to change the way decisions are made about youth group activities or their supervision.
- **Covering up.** When parents feel an organization is withholding information or trying to transfer blame, they may become angry enough to sue.
- **Young leaders.** When young leaders are the primary staff leading an activity during which an accident occurred, parents can jump to the conclusion that their child wasn’t supervised by a capable leader.

**MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR MISTAKES.** Learn from your mistakes and from the mistakes of others. Sometimes minor accidents and near misses are funny. But don’t just laugh about them. Learn your lesson and believe that next time you might not be so fortunate.

**TAKE THE “MY KIDS” TEST.** Treat each young person like your own child. Don’t put any student into a situation in which you wouldn’t readily place your own child.

**LEAD BY EXAMPLE.** The leader sets the pace for volunteers in the issues of safety and every other matter. Don’t bend the rules for your personal comfort or convenience.

**BALANCE YOUR THEOLOGY.**

Pray for God’s protection, but exercise the thoughtful responsibility God has given to you. Don’t count on God to suspend the forces of nature or the laws of physics to protect you (or your kids) from the results of careless planning.

To create a safe youth ministry, teach and model these general safety principles to your team of volunteer youth workers. Share experiences that illustrate these principles, and discuss how they apply to your group.

If your church or ministry uses 15-passenger vans, you should be aware of two advisory warnings on their use issued by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The first warning was issued in April 2001, and several fatal crashes involving trips by religious groups led the federal agency to issue a second advisory a year later.

According to the traffic safety agency, a 15-passenger van that’s fully loaded has a rollover risk six times greater than one with fewer than five occupants. The rollover risk is nearly three times greater with 10 to 15 occupants than with fewer than five. Between 1990 and 2000, 1,281 of these vans were involved in crashes that killed 864 people.

Fifteen-passenger vans were designed to carry cargo and were later fitted as passenger vehicles. However, because of their original design, they don’t comply with many of the safety requirements that apply to passenger cars or school buses. When more than 10 people occupy the van, the passenger weight raises the center of gravity and shifts it to the rear. This makes 15-passenger vans more likely to overturn in an emergency. Also, because these vans are substantially longer and wider than cars, they require more space for changing lanes and more time for braking.

Most 15-passenger vans have single rather than dual rear wheels. This means they don’t have enough rear traction when fully loaded to safely perform emergency steering maneuvers. A sharp turn in an emergency could cause rear tire slide, or fishtailing.

The glass used in 15-passenger vans raises another safety concern. Most passenger vehicles use laminated glass, but these vans use tempered glass, which is less likely to keep occupants from being thrown out during a collision.

If your ministry uses 15-passenger vans, you may be able to reduce the risk of accidents by following these precautions:

- Take no more than nine occupants.
- Remove the rear seat to make sure that passengers sit in front of the rear axle, and load occupants from the front.
- Require occupants to wear seat belts at all times. Create a written policy to this effect, and make drivers responsible for enforcing it.
- Carry nothing on the roof.
- Inspect tires monthly to make sure they’re properly inflated and that the tread isn’t worn down.

Deacon’s Bench

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