

KENNEWICK FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
Van/Transportation Study Committee Report
May 31, 2006

SUMMARY REPORT

The Van/Transportation Study Committee has been reviewing since Nov. 2005 all aspects of our Church provided transportation and has concluded that some improvements need to be made. These are outlined here. For persons interested, a much more detailed report describing our current situation, background information, and more details on the recommendations is available from the Church office.

The committee recommends the following steps, in order:

1. Sell, or otherwise dispose of, our oldest 15-passenger van. (Completed)
2. Purchase a trailer for hauling equipment. (Completed)
3. Purchase a commercial van with capacity for at least 20 people.
4. Purchase a commercial "California-ready" bus with capacity for at least 50 people.
5. Sell, or otherwise dispose of, another 15-passenger van.
6. Purchase a commercial van with capacity for at least 2 wheelchairs and 15 other passengers.
7. Possibly obtain a second trailer.

It is further recommended that the first three steps be undertaken immediately, using a new "Vehicle Acquisition" account, perhaps some rummage sale funds, and obtaining a loan for any remaining amount needed.

The detailed report identifies a number of funding possibilities for vehicle purchase. It's recommended that as many sources as possible be used, including youth group savings and a specific "vehicle acquisition" fund drive.

It's recommended that we change the name of the Van Committee to Transportation Committee, expand their membership to about 5 or 6 people, and give them specific responsibilities regarding equipment, drivers, and operations. Those responsibilities are outlined in the detailed report.

Finally, the Committee recommends that a new account be established in the Transitory Fund for vehicle acquisition, that 75% of the current Van account be transferred to it, and that we change the current Van account to one for Vehicle maintenance and operations only.

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DETAILED REPORT

CURRENT SITUATION

Vehicles. The Church currently owns three 15-passenger vans. The 1988 one stays in town because there are a number of mechanical issues with it, and it is not considered reliable. The 1997 and 1998 ones each have 60 – 80,000 miles on them.

15-passenger vans are notorious for being top-heavy and difficult to control when fully loaded. A volunteer driver who is not thoroughly familiar with the van just compounds that problem. In addition, the space behind the back seat is often needed for luggage or equipment, which contributes to the weight issue. Several of our youth leaders simply will not drive one of the Church's vans because of the driving risk.

To increase the safety of the 15-passenger vans, the back seat is taken out of them for most trips, so they are a little less top-heavy. However that decreases the capacity to 11 people, thereby necessitating the use of more vehicles. That space is used only for hauling light-weight items.

Groups. The youth groups use our present vans on a regular basis with an average of two day-trips per month and three to four extended trips per group each year. The number of youth and leaders on most of these trips require four to six other vehicles which are provided by the parents, who also function as leaders. Usually there is also a rented trailer carrying luggage and equipment. The Senior High Youth rent a commercial bus at a cost of about \$8,000 for their biannual trips to Mexico.

Other groups use the vans at times, but these uses are not as regular as the youth. This includes Seniors, women's groups, camping groups, committees, staff, etc. For the smaller groups, the existing vans are adequate, but the Seniors rent a commercial bus at a cost of about \$450, including the driver's time, for most of their day trips.

An estimate of \$1,000 per day for a bus and driver(s) is probably a good starting point when estimating costs for overnight trips.

Needs. Many needs are common throughout all groups. At the least, capacity is needed for the people and their personal effects – coats, hats, purses, etc. If the trip is an overnigher, then space to accommodate luggage and possibly sleeping bags is also needed.

If the trip involves service activities to others, storage space for music equipment, art projects, games, construction tools, etc. may also be needed. It has been proposed that

the Church obtain a 12 – 15 foot fully enclosed trailer to haul equipment and/or luggage on mission trips. The youth groups rent a trailer, usually at a cost of about \$200, for such purposes an average of 5 - 6 times per year. A new one could be obtained for less than \$5,000 but an effort is underway to find someone in the Church who may be able to donate a good used one.

On longer trips, restroom facilities within the transportation equipment would be very helpful for groups of all ages. And wheel chair accommodations are desirable at times.

Logistics of large caravans. In the past few years, the average Jr. High travel group has been about 55-60 people, including the leaders. It may average as high as 70 this year. The Sr. High travel groups have averaged 50-55 and the Seniors have averaged about 45. The youth groups try to travel with a leader to student ratio of at least 1:5. Even with large vehicles, the youth groups usually have six to eight vehicles in a caravan. This requires a great deal of phone calling and scheduling just to get that many adults and vehicles coordinated for a single trip.

When traveling within an hour or so of home and everyone knows where the destination is, coordination does not become much of a problem. But when traveling long distances, such as to Portland, the logistics become substantial. Gas stops, potty stops, etc., all need to be planned and coordinated. A rest stop where there is one toilet for each sex will easily consume 30 minutes for a group of 60 people.

Each vehicle needs to be within sight of the one in front and in back, which becomes much more difficult in high traffic (urban freeway) areas, on city streets, and at night. If an emergency occurs, all vehicles must respond – it may be necessary to get towing or mechanical service for a vehicle, to transport someone for medical care, to shift loads, etc. When parking within a city, the vehicles may be spread into three or four different parking lots, all at different distances from the actual destination. And parking fees have totaled as high as \$150 for a group visit to one place.

A substantial issue with this arrangement is that almost all adult leaders are also drivers. If they are short of sleep because of supervisory responsibilities, they may not be as alert and careful as normal while they are driving.

In addition to detailed pre-trip planning, the leaders all carry cell phones to handle changes in plans. But cell phones are not an easy rescue when someone misses a turn-off in an urban area unfamiliar to everyone.

Costs and subsidies to users. Van users currently pay for fuel used during a trip, but nothing is paid to assist with van maintenance or replacement. Fuel alone, though, can be expensive. It costs about \$500 to fuel vehicles taking a youth group to Lehman Hot Springs.

Some Church groups provide subsidies for members who cannot afford the fees associated with a particular activity.

Drivers. No special driver's license is required, so anyone can drive the Church's vans. A few people do on a fairly regular basis, but many people drive them only one or two times.

Maintenance. A Van Subcommittee of the Trustees oversees van maintenance. The costs for this have been very low the past few years, because a local firm has provided most of the maintenance free of charge. There is a van account for this purpose in the Transitory Fund of the Church. \$1,800 has been put into this account from the Church's general fund for each of the past several years, but because of the tight budget in 2006, nothing was budgeted for this. In addition, recycling income, interest earnings from the Transitory Fund, and any trip fees go into this account, and any other fuel expenses come out of it.

Insurance. Liability insurance for the Church and for the drivers is provided through the Church's general liability insurance.

OPTIONS

15-passenger vans. One option is to continue using 15-passenger vans with the back seat removed, effectively making them 11 passenger vans. That would preserve the flexibility of allowing anyone to drive the vehicles, but also preserve the liability of using vehicles that are notoriously accident-prone. It would also preserve all of the logistical issues of traveling in large caravans for the larger groups and force individual decisions to rent a commercial bus for special occasions.

If this option is chosen, the Church should replace the 1986 van at the very least, and additional vans might be advisable. A new 15-passenger van will cost about \$30,000 for a basic model, while a used one might be found for \$10,000 – 15,000.

Commercial vans. These "dial-a-ride" sized vehicles would require drivers with a Commercial Driver's License (CDL). (See the discussion about CDL's below.) These vehicles can be obtained with capacities of 15 – about 25 people. Sometimes there are wheel-chair lifts and tie-downs also included, but there are rarely bathroom facilities on these vans. They can generally be obtained used for about \$30 – 35,000. These vans are available both with gasoline and diesel power, but diesel is the preferred choice. However, that might change the availability of low-cost or free maintenance that the Church now enjoys.

Commercial buses. These buses would also require CDL licensed drivers. Used buses can be obtained for prices ranging from about \$12,000 to \$180,000 and in capacities of 45 to 57 passengers. Generally speaking, the larger buses are more expensive, but much depends upon the age of the bus, its condition, and the additional amenities it offers. Amenities include wheel chair capacity, a bathroom, overhead storage, under-bus storage, etc.

Another cost factor on a bus is whether or not it is already certified for use in California. (California has much stricter standards for buses operating there than anywhere else in the country, and the standards apply to all buses whenever they are in the state. Since our Sr. High's go through CA on their way to Mexico, it makes sense to have a "California-ready" bus if we're going to have a bus.)

Probably the "sweet-spot" for us, if we get a bus, is a "California-ready" 50+ passenger bus with restroom, wheel chair capacity, overhead storage, and under-bus storage. A good one could probably be obtained for about \$60,000. It is estimated that the Church would have 14 – 16 trips per year for a bus initially.

Mixed fleet. Probably the Church will always have to rely upon some members supporting some activities with their own personal transportation. But we could achieve a transportation program that significantly reduces the time and responsibility commitment of a number of people by having a fleet of two or three types of vehicles.

COMMERCIAL DRIVERS LICENSES

A Commercial Driver's License (CDL) with a passenger endorsement would be required for anyone driving commercial vans or commercial buses. If we choose to meet part of our transportation needs with one of these types of vehicles, we need to determine how we are going to provide drivers. And we need to assign responsibility for driver recruitment and training to some group within the Church.

Many truck drivers have a CDL, but bus and van drivers need a CDL with a special passenger endorsement. School bus drivers and transit system drivers would already have the special endorsement. CDL truck drivers could probably add the endorsement, and many RV'rs could probably get the necessary license and endorsement.

The transportation committee believes that even with one vehicle requiring a CDL driver, the Church should probably have 10 – 12 drivers within our availability. Schedules are difficult to coordinate, so it would probably take that many to provide driver coverage whenever groups would want to use the bus. The committee believes that at least 5 or 6 potential drivers could be found among the parents of the current youth groups.

Driver recruitment and training would be an ongoing issue. The test for the CDL costs about \$100 and a health exam (perhaps \$75) is needed every two years. Training could be provided through a commercial firm, or the Church could provide it. Regular commercial rates are about \$750. On the other hand, the Church could purchase the training materials needed and use members who already have the license to provide the practice needed by trainees. If the Church had its own vehicle or could rent one cheaply, the initial training costs would be much lower than the commercial rates. The Church could also solicit reduced rates from a commercial firm.

Another continuing issue would be assuring that Church drivers had regular practice and training. Members who drive for a living would not need it, but the ones who drive only for the Church should have regular practice and training – perhaps 2 times per year.

A third continuing issue is the fact that drivers may be subject to periodic random drug testing. There are very specific legal requirements that must be met when drivers are paid, one of which is that the administrator of this activity cannot be a driver. At this time, it is unclear whether drug testing is required for volunteer drivers.

One issue with the current vans is that sometimes passengers have not felt that the driver was as good as needed – the passenger(s) felt unsafe. It's been suggested that an age limit be imposed upon any member-drivers, although the Committee recognizes that age alone is not a good determiner of a safe driver.

Another option is to hire a driver whenever one is needed. Obviously, that increases the user fee necessary to offset the expenses of operating the vehicle.

FUNDING VEHICLE IMPROVEMENTS

Changing the Church's vehicles will cost noticeable amounts of money, but the current system is costing quite a bit through on-going expenses. A variety of funding sources have been suggested. These include using rummage sale funds, a vending machine for coffees and chocolate similar to those found in convenience stores, using funds in the Van account of the Transitory Fund, assistance from various youth group accounts using funds saved on equipment rentals, an organized fund drive, and securing a loan to purchase vehicle equipment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This committee recommends the following steps in changing our vehicle fleet to improve our transportation system for all sponsored activities:

1. Sell, or otherwise dispose of, our oldest 15-passenger van.
2. Purchase a trailer for hauling equipment.
3. Purchase a commercial van with capacity for at least 20 people.
4. Purchase a commercial "California-ready" bus with capacity for at least 50 people.
5. Sell, or otherwise dispose of, our next poorest 15-passenger van.
6. Purchase a commercial van with capacity for at least 2 wheelchairs and 15 other passengers.
7. Possibly obtain a second trailer. (This could easily come earlier in this sequence if it was gifted to the Church.)

Establish a new "Vehicle Acquisition" account in the Transitory Fund and start its funding by transferring 75% of the current Van account to it. Change the remaining

funds in the Van account to a “Vehicle maintenance and operations” account. (In addition to maintaining, fueling, etc., this account should also reimburse Church members obtaining a CDL license only for Church purposes).

It is further recommended that the first three steps in changing our vehicle fleet be undertaken immediately, using the newly established Vehicle Acquisition account, perhaps some rummage sale funds, and obtaining a loan for any remaining amount needed. (And, it is recognized that after all of these changes are made, there will still be situations in which other transportation arrangements will need to be made.)

It is recommended that funding for vehicle acquisitions be obtained through as many sources as possible. And we recommend that a specific “vehicle acquisition” fund drive be designed and carried out.

Change the name of the Van Committee to Transportation Committee, expand their membership to about 5 or 6 people, and give them the following responsibilities regarding equipment, drivers, and operations:

For equipment; develop the specifications needed, purchase the needed equipment within financial parameters established by the Finance Committee and the Administrative Council, arrange maintenance of the equipment, arrange required inspections, and report to the Trustees and the Administrative Council issues and concerns about equipment.

For drivers, establish requirements (including background checks and drug testing requirements), recruit, train, assist with licensing procedures, re-train semi-annually as needed, supervise all legal requirements, document all training and licensing, remove drivers from our authorized list when judged necessary, etc.

For operations, develop charging procedures to build an adequate maintenance and operations fund and an acquisition fund, develop checklists for pre-trip procedures, etc.

SUBMITTED BY, AND SIGNATURES

This report and recommendation was prepared by the Van/Transportation Study Committee for the Administrative Council. Members were all of the Van Committee, Don Shirey, Jerry Wilhelm, and Randy Bement, as well as Jerry Hansen, Nancy Lawrence, Shirley Painter, Kevin Howard, and Mona Miller. This represents our best thinking to this date. We'll be glad to work with the Administrative Council in any necessary further investigations and/or implementation processes.

Sincerely yours,