

# How to protect your mission trip from abusers

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In 2014, Matthew Durham arrived in Kenya from Oklahoma to serve as a summer missionary in a Nairobi orphanage. Today, he is serving a 40-year prison sentence. Why? Matthew Durham sexually abused four children multiple times in the month he spent in that Kenyan orphanage.

But Matthew Durham is an exception, right? Isn't he just one evil individual among the 2 million American Christians who participate in short-term mission trips annually? Unfortunately, Matthew Durham probably isn't an exception. In fact, evidence suggests that not only does sexual abuse happen during international mission trips, but that pedophiles are targeting your church's mission trip as an opportunity to access children.

## **How big is the problem?**

We can't accurately gauge the severity of the problem. Sexual abuse is a hidden crime and often goes unreported, whether in the U.S. or internationally. However, the research conducted by the Global Study on Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism (a joint project of academic researchers, the United Nations, law enforcement agencies, and NGOs) is alarming, to say the least. For example, data from Dutch police demonstrated that out of 85 cases where Dutch nationals were convicted of abusing children abroad, 13 occurred through volunteering opportunities at orphanages. In the wake of the scandal involving the British charity Oxfam, over 120 workers for British charities (both Christian and secular) have been accused of sexual abuse.

Examining the phenomenon of volun-tourism (short-term volunteer trips, of which Christian mission trips are a significant part), the Global Study demonstrates that volun-tourist activities give pedophiles the direct-access to children that they need under a minimal amount of scrutiny. Most organizations have little-to-no screening or training of volunteers before or during volun-tourist trips.

We would all prefer to believe that sexual abuse has never occurred on one of our church's mission trips and that it never would. But we should know better. The truth is that short-term mission trips are a way that pedophiles can gain access to children, and many of our mission trips have lower standards for volunteers than our church nurseries.

## **What should your church do to protect children around the world?**

If you send volunteers from your church to proclaim and demonstrate the love of Christ to the world, then you have a duty to adequately screen and train those volunteers. A failure to do so risks undermining the gospel message that you are committed to proclaiming. So, where do we begin?

We must begin by changing how we often think about mission trips. If our mission trips are primarily about our own self-fulfillment, then we dehumanize the people we serve as a means of inflating our own self-worth. We hurt those we serve when we are the focus.

So, we can start by determining that going on your church's mission trip is not a right. It is a privilege and a responsibility. It is a privilege to travel around the globe and serve those made in the image of God. It is a responsibility to safeguard the dignity of the people we serve and the integrity of the long-term missionaries that we partner with. Therefore, your volunteers should expect to be screened and trained for the privilege of service, especially if it involves serving children.

Here are seven actionable steps that you should take:

1. **Only work with organizations that prioritize the safety of the children they serve.** Evaluate the missionaries or mission organizations that you partner with, and ask them hard questions about how they protect children. Some organizations like the International Mission Board have child protection policies, but many organizations do not.
2. **Perform criminal background checks.** Criminal background checks have become standard procedure for volunteering in children and youth ministries in U.S. churches. They should also become a minimum standard for mission trip volunteers. While criminal background checks can never guarantee that your volunteers are safe since many sexual offenders have never been convicted, they do serve as a deterrent to those with prior convictions.
3. **Give basic training to your team of volunteers.** Most of us need to be reminded that you can't spot a sexual offender by looking at them. There is no profile. But we can learn to recognize the grooming process utilized by offenders to gain the trust of potential victims. At the very least, such training signals to a pedophile that your mission trip is not the easy-access opportunity that they are searching for.
4. **Have common-sense rules about volunteer-child interactions.** Team members should not be alone with children. They should not sleep in the same room as children. Volunteers should also know the difference between appropriate and inappropriate touch.
5. **Be aware of peer-to-peer sexual abuse.** This is especially important on mission trips that involve teenage volunteers. Sexual abuse is not a crime perpetrated by adults alone. Kids also abuse other kids.
6. **Understand the power imbalance.** Sexual abuse always involves the exercise of power of the offender over the victim. When Americans travel to other countries, we signal wealth and power. At the very least, we possess the immense wealth necessary to travel to another country. In many countries around the world, corrupt judicial systems means that our wealth also signals legal immunity.
7. **Understand and accept the legal consequences of committing a crime overseas.** Make sure that your team understands that if they commit a crime on your mission trip then they will face the legal consequences in that country. Your team is not above the law. If a member of your team commits a crime, report it to the local authorities or seek the assistance of the U.S. embassy in reporting the crime.

By doing these things, we can impede those pedophiles who target short-term mission trips as opportunities to access children. We must protect those we serve, and we must defend the integrity of the gospel we proclaim.