

## **Lessons Learned from a Fatal Crash**

### **What Churches Don't Know about Operating Motorcoaches and the Law Can Lead to Deadly Consequences**

After a motorcoach operated by a Texas church crashed, killing eight passengers, the National Transportation Safety Board's (NTSB's) investigation uncovered a nationwide problem. Many churches and other groups may be unwittingly operating unsafely as commercial motor carriers, not following safety regulations required for commercial vehicles and drivers, and not properly registering vehicles with the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA).

"The investigation pointed to numerous shortcomings," said Acting NTSB Chairman Mark V. Rosenker, "and we urge organizations that operate motorcoaches to learn the lessons from this accident so it doesn't happen again."

The accident occurred on October 13, 2003, when a Neoplan 49-passenger motorcoach, owned and operated by the First Baptist Church of Eldorado, Texas, was traveling on Interstate 20 near Tallulah, Louisiana. It was carrying 14 passengers from Shreveport, Louisiana, to Tuscaloosa, Alabama, as part of a multicity sightseeing tour. It drifted onto the shoulder and struck a stopped tractor semitrailer. In addition to the fatalities, the motorcoach driver and six passengers were seriously injured.

The Safety Board said the driver's chronic insomnia, chronic pain, sleep apnea, and history of interrupted sleep contributed to the accident because it reduced his sleep, increased fatigue, and reduced alertness. Contributing to the severity of the injuries was the failure of the motorcoach seat anchorages.

Other problems were identified during the investigation. After the accident, the FMCSA conducted a compliance review and issued the church a U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) number and an "Unsatisfactory" safety rating because of the church's failure to follow Federal safety regulations. The church said it had been unaware that its motorcoach was a commercial vehicle, unaware of the existence of the FMCSA and the requirement to obtain a USDOT number, and unaware of the need to adhere to Federal motorcoach and driver safety rules.

When the church had applied for title, registration, and license plates from Texas, the State classified the vehicle as a "private bus," and the church thought its motorcoach was not a commercial vehicle. Information about the Federal definition of a commercial vehicle, which would have indicated that the church's motorcoach did not belong to this class, did not appear on the Texas title or registration application forms, the NTSB said.

Because many State applications do not provide any information on the FMCSA and the Federal rules for commercial vehicles, the NTSB said that some motorcoach and bus owners might not be aware of the need to contact the FMCSA for guidance.

The NTSB urged operators of motorcoaches to get accurate safety information. One way, the NTSB suggested, is to log onto a page on the FMCSA's Web site called "Safe Transportation of Passengers by Motorcoach—and What It Means to You." It provides access to educational and outreach information on bus and truck driver wellness programs, sharing the road safely, and the FMCSA National Training Center. The citation is <http://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/safetyprogs/bus.htm>.

In addition, the FMCSA Web page provides detailed information to assist users in evaluating the safety practices of interstate motorcoach companies before chartering a company. Topics include driver qualifications, limitations on driving, vehicle standards, subcontracting agreements, insurance requirements, requesting carrier operating authority information, and researching carrier insurance and safety information.

Following the crash, the NTSB urged the FMCSA to do more by developing and distributing educational materials for nontraditional commercial vehicle owners, such as church groups, on how to comply with the Federal safety rules.

Sidebar:

### **Passengers Trapped Under Seats; NTSB Urges Inspections and Tougher Standards**

The investigation into the Tallulah motorcoach accident also uncovered a problem with the way seats were anchored in the motorcoach. Many passenger seats did not remain secure in their original positions in the passenger compartment, even those located a distance from the impact area.

When emergency responders arrived on scene, they found the seats “piled up” near the front of the motorcoach and passengers trapped among and under the seats. The failure of the seat anchorages, which occurred when unrestrained passengers were thrown against other seats during the accident, caused entire seat frames to move forward. As the seats moved forward, passengers were pinned between them, which increased the severity of their injuries, the NTSB report said.

One reason the seats did not remain in their original positions during the accident was that several of the bolts that fastened the seats to the floor track had been incorrectly installed. According to the motorcoach manufacturer, Neoplan USA Corp., the seat securement design of the motorcoach permitted the owner to move seats within the passenger compartment. However, Neoplan did not include any guidance on unlocking, moving, repositioning, or securing the seats.

The NTSB said owners of Neoplan motorcoaches would not have known how to properly secure the seats or how to inspect and maintain the seats in a secure position. This lack of understanding can lead to improperly secured seats, seat failures, and severe or fatal passenger injuries in an accident, according to the NTSB. The NTSB urges owners and operators of Neoplan buses to contact the company directly to address any anchorage problems. It has also asked Neoplan to include information in its motorcoach manuals that inform owners of the importance of following proper procedures and of checking passenger seat anchorages during routine inspections.

The NTSB also urged the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to develop performance standards for passenger seat anchorages in motorcoaches. Currently, there are no performance standards or requirements for seat anchorages, leading to inconsistent occupant protection.

For a complete copy of the accident report, visit the NTSB’s Web site, [www.nts.gov](http://www.nts.gov).