

PLANNING A WILDERNESS OUTING BY LAND OR SEA?

Safety First! is the catch phrase for anyone trained in wilderness travel, whether that travel is a youth group day hike, climbing Mount Olympus, or sea kayaking in the San Juan Islands. Unfortunately, for all too many church related groups, both young and not so young, this phrase is ignored at the cost of lives which could have been spared. If your church is considering sponsoring a wilderness outing this Spring or Summer, please consider the following:

*What **training** do the leaders have? Is it **more than adequate** to handle any eventuality that might occur in the environment they'll be traveling in and through?

*Is their **training** matched up with **solid experience** in the environment where your group will be travelling?

*What sort of **safety and rescue** training do they have? Are their certificates current? Do they carry rescue equipment that is equal to the conditions they might encounter? This includes rapidly changing weather (e.g. a freak snowstorm in the mountains, gale force winds at sea, etc.), natural disasters (e.g. avalanches, landslides, etc.), and other variables beyond their control. Remember, a **mountain** safety and rescue course will do you no good if you're in a sea kayak and the other way around.

*What **wilderness first aid and cpr courses** have they taken? Again, are their certificates current? Are their first aid kits and knowledge comprehensive enough to handle any situation they might encounter?

*In the event of an emergency, how will your group **communicate** with front country rescue agencies?

*Is your group's **equipment** in good enough shape and of high enough quality to keep group members safe throughout their journey? A cheap discount store windbreaker blocks the wind on the way to school, but is a poor substitute for high quality immersion wear on the water or Gore-tex and down at altitude.

*Does your group know how to **use their equipment**? An ice axe is a magnificent tool for glacier travel, but, not if you don't know the pick from the adze and how to safely deploy it in a self or group rescue. A paddle float and pump are well designed pieces of kit, but, the time to learn how to use them for your own safety and that of others is not in the midst of a twenty knot wind.

*What are the limits of your church *liability insurance*? Might you need an additional rider to cover the specific event? What provisions does your insurance carrier make for the training and certification of trip leaders?

IF YOU CAN'T ANSWER WITH A STRONG 'YES' TO ALL OF THE ABOVE, IT IS TIME TO RETHINK YOUR APPROACH TO THE TRIP. You don't need to cancel, but you might need assistance in getting to a "yes" for all of the above. Here are some suggestions:

Many of the camps and outdoor ministries of Region 1 offer wilderness trips with well trained and qualified guides, and state of the art equipment. Think about spending a few extra dollars and using their services.

The Mountaineers (in Washington), the Mazamas (Oregon), and other wilderness travel clubs regularly offer trainings and clinics to cover all of the above.

Commercial shops abound in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska and employ guides and instructors with a wealth of knowledge and experience they are ready and eager to share with others. It is well worth the price!

If all of the above seems just a bit too much, consider this: if you are the trip leader, which is the better scenario:

*Having an extra fund raiser to raise extra monies for proper training and equipment,

Or,

*Standing at Joey's or Susie's parent's front door to let them know you lost their child on your watch?

Get the proper training, use good gear, and make well informed decisions, so everyone is safe, has fun, and comes home with incredible memories, and no nightmares.

John LaMunyon is an ELCA Pastor and a UKCC Level 2 Paddlesports Coach with certifications in Sea Kayaking, Whitewater Canoeing, Whitewater Safety and Rescue, Wilderness Medicine, Mountaineering, Long Distance Cycling, and other outdoor pursuits. In addition to serving as the Lead Pastor of Sammamish Hills Lutheran Church in Sammamish, WA, he is also a part-time instructor at the Kayak Academy in Issaquah, WA. He has over forty years experience in leading others safely through the mountains, rivers, lakes, and seas of the inland and coastal Northwest. During that time period the only time his first aid kit has come out has been to wrap sprained ankles and put moleskin on blisters.