

Guns in Churches

Addressing Church Security Needs

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The information in this publication is intended to help ministry leaders better understand issues of weapons for church security and assist them in developing a weapons or crisis intervention policy for their churches and related ministries. No portion of this publication should be used without prior legal review, revision and approval by an attorney licensed to practice law in your state. Mennonite Mutual Insurance Company assumes no liability for reliance upon the information provided in this publication.

Introduction

Historically, there have been two or three fatal church shooting incidents in the United States annually from approximately 335,000 congregations. The Christian Security Network reports that each week brings an average of two arsons, seven thefts, and 19 burglaries at U.S. churches.⁵ Jeffrey Hawkins, the founder and executive director of Christian Security Network says *"It's all about awareness... No church is immune from this kind of thing and they have to start now. There is no tomorrow."*⁶ These situations put the staff, church members, and visitors at risk.

Fatal church attacks result from a variety of issues and are not necessarily triggered from the individual who is angry with people of faith in general. Robbery was already mentioned, but domestic disputes can also prove to be tragic when an estranged husband confronts his wife and the attack results in innocent parishioners caught in the cross fire. There are incidents involving persons angry at a pastor or other types of personal conflicts. So far, these kinds of violent attacks have been far more prevalent than acts of terrorism.

"We frequently receive calls and emails from church members who are worried and frustrated that their church leadership is not more proactive about church security," says Jeffrey Hawkins of the Christian Security network. "As a society, we protect businesses, schools, banks and other institutions. Now more than ever, that same level of protection needs to be extended to churches and faith-based organizations."¹

It would be easy to simply say, "Let's look at scripture." But does scripture clearly spell out what we are to do in cases of people carrying out a violent attack in the church? For many congregations it becomes a theological or philosophical discussion. Many people and denominations believe the taking of a life in any case is wrong, Matthew 5:9 says *"Blessed are the peacemakers"*. Others believe they are called by God to take every measure necessary to thwart any attack on the church. Luke 22:36, *"He said to them, but now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one."* Exodus 20:13 says, *"You shall not murder,"* along with several other passages that point to all life being sacred. However, in Nehemiah 4:17 we read *"Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other."* They were trying to guard and protect the work of rebuilding the wall. We are commanded in 1 Peter 5:8 to, *"Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."*

So, does scripture clearly spell out what we are to do in such cases of people attacking the church, its leaders and the flock in general? For many congregations it becomes a theological or philosophical discussion.

With all this in mind, church leaders are struggling with the best approach to address the growing issues that place their flock and themselves at risk. Some pastors feel under pressure from the urging of members to be allowed to carry concealed weapons in states that allow them. Others are feeling pressure to keep guns out of church altogether. Many leaders want to do everything they can to protect people attending church, but fear a bad incident might turn worse should too many people have guns at church.

Still other pastors and leaders have never even thought of or had a discussion regarding church violence and safety.

According to Richard Hammar, *“Most churches in America are safe places. While incidents of shootings on church property are shocking, they are rare. But because of the “open access” policy of most churches, they remain easy targets for violent acts. While such acts cannot be prevented, there are steps that church leaders can take to manage the risk.”*²

This resource is intended to address the various approaches churches are taking to address the issues of violence in churches. Next, it will introduce leaders to their state laws. Finally, it will help leaders understand liabilities and coverage issues from Mennonite Mutual Insurance Company’s perspective.

Regardless of the approach your church takes, we encourage you to make that decision based on study and prayer. Obtain clear facts, have frank discussions with your church leaders and insurance agent, and develop and adhere to clearly written policies.

What are the options?

You will hear many suggestions, ideas, and options in response to this issue. Some of them may be good, while others may not be in the best interest of your church and people. Let’s consider the pros and cons of each option.

Option #1: Never allow guns on church property.

A church can adopt this approach for a couple of reasons. From a doctrinal standpoint, there is support for believing that churches are to love their enemies, show the way of peace and be an example of non-violent resolution to conflicts. There are practical considerations as well. Having weapons can bring additional liability to the church. The potential for accidents, unintentional injury to innocent bystanders, excessive use of force, and confusion when police arrive over who is a threat, are all downsides that can offset any benefits of additional security. Of course, the biggest downside is the increased risk of loss of life or injury until law enforcement arrives.

Option #2: Where allowed by law, give permission to individuals to carry weapons

The advantage of this approach is that members of the congregation have the ability to protect themselves and others with force should the need arise. The disadvantage is the church has no control over how the use of force is administered as there are no policies, procedures or guidelines in place.

Option #3: Hire only trained professionals.

This can include professionally trained and equipped security agencies or off-duty law enforcement officers. Many churches in high risk areas have used this approach for years. The advantage is that churches shift liability away from themselves to the outside agency. These professionally trained security officers and off-duty officers are usually trained in

such areas as crisis intervention, de-escalation, and proper non-lethal tactics. Most parishioners, even those with a concealed carry permit, do not have this level of training.

Some churches utilize uniformed security personnel while others operate in plain clothes. Regardless, such trained personnel have the best chance at stopping or minimizing violence should it occur. This option is preferred by the previously mentioned legal expert Richard Hammar, *“The exercise of reasonable care can best be demonstrated by hiring only uniformed, off-duty police officers as security guards.”*³

On the downside, to hire off-duty personnel during church events comes at a cost. Some private security personnel can cost a church \$17-25 an hour while off-duty law enforcement officers can cost \$25 per hour and up. For some churches, this is just not possible due to limited finances.

Another potential drawback is that the hired officer is not connected to your church and therefore may not represent your church’s values.

Option #4: **An in-house, volunteer, trained security team.**

With the tremendous growth in the number of people who hold their Concealed Carry Weapon permit, the number of churches forming “safety teams” of people who are carrying weapons to church is rapidly increasing. The advantage of such an approach is the church leadership can form policies and procedures for how the team will respond in accordance with the church’s beliefs and values.

When a church forms a safety team, it takes on additional liability, as its members are now acting on behalf of the church, under their direction and control. Therefore the disadvantage to this approach can be the additional liability created by insufficient training and procedures. Richard Hammar shares, *“Security guards with little or no training, and who are not licensed under state law, present the greatest risk of liability to a church or other employer as a result of injuries they inflict while responding to a crime or otherwise performing their duties, or injuries they fail to prevent.”*⁴

We believe churches who form armed safety teams are obligated to a higher standard of care and must be prepared to answer in court for any action taken with thoughtfully designed policies, procedures and training. Churches need to ask, “What should we do if...?” and make sure the entire team understands and is willing to abide by the church leadership’s values and direction.

Churches should also keep in mind that most security incidents don’t require the use of weapons. Therefore, safety teams should undergo training that includes emergency/crisis identification and response, de-escalation, restraint techniques, and emergency communications as well as guidelines regarding the use of force.

In addition to any assistance that local law enforcement is willing to provide, there are a growing number of training resources and consultants to support this approach. Ideally, it should be “hands-on” training where you can practice, be corrected, and refine your tactics, but other options include sending a team to a training center or conference, having a consultant come onsite to train your volunteers, as well as videos and online training.

There is one aspect of having an armed security team that is worthy of special consideration. While having a Concealed Carry Weapon permit provides a foundation for the safe handling and use of a weapon, the many considerations of firing a weapon in a public place, let alone a room crowded with people, is an area that requires ongoing additional training by law enforcement personnel and therefore should also be addressed for church security teams through the training methods listed above.

There is debate as to whether the security team should be high profile or low profile. There are advantages to being visible; it shows people entering the building that this facility is protected. Some teams have a shirt that indicates they are safety or security, but the low profile approach also has some advantages. Visitors and parishioners may be put off by uniforms or high profile images. Secondly, it is easier to observe and get closer to people without incident if you are not seen as a “designated” safety/security person. This issue is up to the discretion of church leaders.

Therefore, churches should use good judgment as they select team members and determine what training is needed. This is because churches can be found liable for negligent selection and training of security team members. They should be pleasant, willing to engage people in positive ways, and have a good eye to see potential problems before they occur.

As with hiring security personnel, the in-house training option can be costly. Some churches will opt for initial training but not follow through with ongoing training. This could be a serious mistake and expose the church to even greater liability if the court finds your team lacked ongoing training. If not trained correctly and regularly, you could regret engaging in this option.

How does a church decide which option to choose?

If churches decide to implement a security team with firearms, the best option is to hire off-duty law enforcement professionals or security agency. Should the church opt for training a team of security personnel within their church, the church must be committed to provide training by qualified professionals. The church must offer not only initial training to the team, but plan for ongoing training. Documentation should be kept that includes who conducted the training, when it was done, what topics were covered, what team members were present, and whenever possible, demonstrated and documented competency on the subjects taught.

Summary

As leaders, you are expected to gather the facts, become informed, consult the experts, pray, and have open discussion with your members and leaders. By following this process, you can design a policy that is thought out, concise, and clearly communicated.

No one can completely stop bad things from happening, it is unfortunately part of our human condition and the society we live in. However, a well-designed plan can reduce not only the severity, but also the level of liability a church may encounter if, or when, something tragic does occur. At the end of the day, we must be able to say as good stewards, "We trusted God and did our very best to care for the people and property entrusted to our care."

[1] Draper, Electa, "Weapons at Church? For Everything There is a Time." *The Denver Post*. Dec. 12, 2007.

[2] Hammar, Richard. "Does Your Church Need a Security Guard?" *Church Law and Tax Report* March/April 2008, p. 1.

[3] *Ibid.* p. 13. [4] *Ibid.* p. 15.

[5] Yeakley, Richard, "Report says crime up at U.S. churches." *The Christian Century*. Feb. 09, 2011.

[6] *Ibid.*

Where to turn for more information

There are organizations, resources, and helpful websites in the area of risk management, safety and security. It is important that you review the specific laws that pertain to your state.

Please be advised that we are not endorsing these websites or organizations. Some of them lean towards their particular view of gun laws, or have a theology or philosophy that may or may not align with Mennonite Mutual Insurance Company or your church. Use discernment when looking into these sites and organizations.

Please know your local insurance agent is always available should you have any additional questions.

State-by-State Gun Laws –

<http://www.handgunlaw.us/>

Indiana: *May carry weapons in churches, even those that have a school or day care.*

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gun_laws_in_Indiana

Ohio: *May not carry weapons on church property without permission.*

The law sets forth several places where your permit does not allow you to carry a handgun. Under the law, you may not carry a concealed handgun into the following places (see Ohio Attorney General website below for complete list):

- *Places of worship, unless the place of worship gives specific permission to individuals*
- *Child day-care centers*

<http://codes.ohio.gov/orc/2923.12>

Note: At the time of publication, the Ohio House and Senate had passed Senate Bill 215, which would no longer require gun owners to obtain a license to carry a concealed weapon. It is awaiting the Governor's ratification.

Pennsylvania: *No laws against carrying a concealed weapon in church.*

<http://www.pafoa.org/law/carrying-firearms/concealed-carry>

Where to Turn for More Information (cont.)

Businesses that provide Gun Safety and Security Training

PM Security Services, Tactical Weapons Training Group, 26355 Jelloway Road, Danville, OH 43014; 330-317-8607; <http://pmsecurityservicestwtg.com/>

OSS International, 425 S. Sandusky Street, Delaware, OH 43015; 740-363-6774; <http://oss-international.net/> **Books:**

Chin, Carl. *Evil Invades Sanctuary*, Snowfall Press; 2012

Cirtin, Robert. *Church Safety and Security: A Practical Guide*. CSS Publishing Company; 2005

Aguiar, Ron. *Keeping Your Church Safe*. Brienigsville, Penn.: Xulon; 2008

Welch, Robert H. *Serving by Safeguarding Your Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; 2002.

Other Helpful Sites:

<http://www.churchlawandtax.com/> <http://theresurgence.com/2010/01/12/church-safety>

<http://www.churchsecurityalliance.com/members/churchsecurity>

<http://www.christiansecuritynetwork.org> <http://www.right2defend.com/church-security-conference/>

<http://christianfamilyservice.com/workshops/church-security-workshop/>