

Guns in Churches

Addressing Church Security Needs

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Introduction

Ashtabula, OH—On March 31, 2013, witnesses say the 25-year old man accused of walking into the Hiawatha Church of God in Christ and fatally shooting his father after an Easter service was yelling about God and Allah after the killing. Police say the suspect killed his father with a single shot from a handgun.

Flint, MI—On January 12, 2013, a gunman stormed into Full Gospel Church during a funeral and shot a man in the head, killing him. The subject was arrested later after a massive manhunt.

Geeseytown, PA—On December 21, 2012, at Juniata Valley Gospel Church, a woman decorating the church for a Christmas program was shot and killed. The gunman had killed several other people and was later shot and killed by Pennsylvania State Troopers.

Historically, there have been two or three fatal church shooting incidents in the United States annually from approximately 335,000 congregations. In 2011, the Christian Security Network reported 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."*

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, renowned expert on church safety, security, and legal matters for over two decades, *“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 paper 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.

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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 much 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. Aside from doctrine, there are practical considerations as well. Having weapons brings enormous 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.

Option #2: **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 the church like a member would. However, you may be able to hire an officer who has the personality and possibly the same beliefs as your church and can represent you well.

Option #3: **An in-house, volunteer, trained security team.**

There is a growing industry around this approach. Options are: sending a team to a training center or conference; having someone come onsite to train your volunteers; video; online training. Some organizations are comprised of current or former law enforcement officers. There are some church teams that have been trained and now want to train others.

The quality of such training can vary from company to company. Any training, regardless of who you hire to conduct it, should include emergency/crisis identification and response, de-escalation, and use of force. Ideally, it should be “hands-on” training where you can practice, be corrected, and refine your tactics. Furthermore, besides initial training, your team should have ongoing, regular situational training and meetings. A more in-depth annual training by outside professionals is ideal.

Should your church make a determination to allow concealed weapons, all personnel must have more than the basic training needed to obtain a concealed weapons permit. Shooting at a stationary, paper target and firing at a perpetrator in a crowded room are far different. Again, very few civilians are equipped with the mindset needed to engage in such a scenario.

In addition to what is described above, your training should cover other topics such as moving about and observing people, using radios or phones for communication, special considerations for the pastor’s protection, assigned areas, and the use of video surveillance.

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.

The downside to having a volunteer team trained is the difficulty of getting enough of the right personnel to adequately form a successful team. Some people may mean well, but may not be the types of people you need on your team. Some people do not have the skills, maturity, or psychological makeup needed to be a police officer but want to be one. These people are known as “wannabe’s”. Since they would not be hired by a legitimate police department, they’ll settle for a church security position. They may be quick to anger, see issues where there aren’t any, and live to engage someone in a negative way. 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

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.

Note: There is one option we have not advocated here—that of allowing just anyone with a concealed weapon permit to carry a weapon. Pause just a moment and ask yourself, “If there are many people in my congregation carrying weapons and something occurs, am I confident that each of them will make sound, correct decisions, and the end result will be something I can live with?” Making the wrong decision in a crisis can quickly make a bad situation worse.

Allowing or encouraging people to carry weapons into church with no written policy or specialized training creates a huge liability issue and should be avoided.

Regardless of which option is chosen, church leaders should consider posting their policy regarding weapons in and around the church building.

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How does a church decide which option to choose?

Let's be clear, no level of risk management can completely thwart a tragic incident of persons being injured or killed on church property. These incidents often happen without warning and are over very quickly. So what is a church to do? After looking at all the options and their advantages and disadvantages, investing in trained professionals is the best option available to churches from both a liability and tactical aspect. These trained, equipped, and mentally prepared professionals give you the best option to stop or minimize a volatile situation.

There are many occasions where a church may have one of these professionals attending their church. Other professionals may do it at an affordable cost because they are people of faith themselves. If the cost to hire these trained professionals is not an option, providing the proper training for individuals that are carrying concealed weapons becomes the next best option.

The following is Mennonite Mutual Insurance Company's position regarding church security policies for our policyholders:

Instances of violence in churches are few but widely reported, causing some congregations to consider allowing members with concealed carry licenses to carry weapons into church for security purposes. Ohio law prohibits carrying a gun into a place of worship but a church does have the option of giving permission to an individual to do so. Indiana law allows carrying a weapon in church unless the church has a school or day care. Pennsylvania currently does not have a law prohibiting the carrying of a concealed weapon in church.

While we hope every congregation can enjoy safety and security during church services, we think the potential liability risks associated with having guns in churches can outweigh any increase in security that can be gained from their presence. In order to obtain a concealed carry permit, many states only require an individual to be able to demonstrate competency in handling a gun, ammunition, and be able to shoot the firearm. This training does not cover likely scenarios that would be encountered in a church setting, including shoot/don't shoot decision-making, hostage situations, de-escalating tense situations and whether or not the use of force is justified.

Mennonite Mutual's guidelines do not permit churches to allow concealed carry weapons except: 1) active or retired law enforcement or military personnel with firearms training who are either contracted by or are volunteering for the church as security guards; or 2) churches that contract with outside professionals for security; or 3) security training for church personnel.

Again, 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 provide training by qualified and certified professionals. Secondly, the church must offer not only initial training to the team, but show their plan for ongoing training. This should include 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. These guidelines must be in place to be eligible for our church insurance program.

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.*

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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.

State-by-State Gun Laws –

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

Indiana: *May carry weapon in church unless the church has a school or day care.*

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

It is illegal to carry a concealed weapon, even sporting arms, on school property (K-12 and day care) or on a school bus. Lawful gun owners may have guns in their vehicles on school property provided the driver is only transporting someone to, or from, a school event.

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

The law sets forth several places where your license 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://www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov/OhioAttorneyGeneral/files/00/0014c1ed-a150-4726-82fc-686c9062e9d6.pdf>

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

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

<http://www.pacode.com/secure/data/058/chapter465a/s465a.13.html>

<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/>

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