



CARRYING A WEAPON *In Church*

MAXIMUM MINISTRY.
MINIMUM LIABILITY.



MORE THAN FIVE PERCENT OF THE U.S. POPULATION, AND A CONSIDERABLY HIGHER PERCENTAGE OF ADULTS, HAVE A CONCEALED CARRY PERMIT.



“The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is with a good guy with a gun.”

That phrase, now part of the American lexicon to some extent, was first credited to Wayne LaPierre, chief executive officer of the National Rifle Association. He made the statement after the Sandy Hill Elementary School shooting in Connecticut in 2012, and more recently he repeated it after the high school shooting in early 2018 in Parkland, Florida.

Entering **“good guy with a gun”** into a Google search will produce results that are mostly at one of two extremes. One will find multiple stories proclaiming that numerous lives were saved because someone was in the right place at the right time, armed for protection (there are plenty of YouTube selections with security-camera footage of actual incidents). An equal number of stories espouse the opinion that the idea is fatally flawed, is not borne out by statistics, and will cause more harm than good.

According to an August 2017 report on the National Shooting Sports Foundation website, there are now more than 16.3 million concealed carry permit holders in the United States, with a record 1.83 million permits being issued in the previous year alone. That means more than five percent of the U.S. population, and a considerably higher percentage of adults, have a concealed carry permit.

The rationale behind many proponents of personal gun ownership is that criminals will be less likely to attempt a crime in a home or a public place if they know there is a good chance they will find themselves staring down the barrel of a gun. This scenario was played out rather comically in late 2017 when two men attempted to rob a Maryland bar that turned out to be full of off-duty police officers assembled for a retirement party. The perpetrators were apprehended quickly, to say the least.

THERE IS NO WAY TO KNOW HOW
MANY PEOPLE WALK OUT THE DOOR
EVERY SUNDAY MORNING WITH A
BIBLE AND A SIDEARM.



As violence in houses of worship has increased in recent years, it is not surprising that the idea of armed citizens tilting the odds in their own favor has gathered steam among worshippers.

There is no way to know how many people walk out the door every Sunday morning with a Bible and a sidearm on their way to the Lord's house.

The fact that it is happening is not in dispute. The question of whether it SHOULD be happening is another matter entirely, and there are plenty of voices on both sides of the debate.

Certainly, numerous people are extremely uncomfortable with the thought of armed citizens sitting all around them in a church service. They would prefer that their house of worship be a gun-free zone for a variety of reasons. On the other hand, some congregants want to be able to defend themselves in public at all times, and they will make certain they are equipped to do so.

Churches across the United States are forming safety and security teams to protect their members. Among the questions the leaders of these churches are asking is whether any of their safety team members should be armed and how to determine which ones should have that extra responsibility.

The first question to be asked in this situation is a legal one. What, if anything, does the law say regarding whether people may carry concealed weapons in church?

CHURCH LEADERS MUST CONSIDER
THE INSURANCE AND LEGAL
RAMIFICATIONS OF A FIREARM-
RELATED INCIDENT ON THEIR CAMPUS.



The answer will vary from state to state, so it depends on where a church is located. Most state laws will fall into one of the following categories:

- **Concealed weapons permit (CWP) holders are not permitted to carry on church property at all (though in some states, CWP holders may keep weapons locked in their vehicles even though they may not bring them into church buildings).**
- **CWP holders are not permitted to carry on church property unless they are specifically given permission to do so by church leadership (with the same exception as #1 with vehicles). In these states, churches should provide written permission to those given permission to carry unless blanket permission is given to anyone who has a CWP.**
- **State law specifically allows CWP holders to carry on church property (or state law does not specifically address carrying on church property at all). In this case, the church, as a private-property owner, usually still has the right to ban weapons on the property if it chooses to do so, but state law likely regulates the size, location, and type of signage required for churches and other business entities to provide notice to CWP holders that their weapons are not permitted. If the notice provided does not meet the statutory requirements, notice is not deemed lawful and a person who carries a concealed weapon (assuming they have a lawful permit) will generally not be prosecuted. Persons who carry in places where proper notice has been posted that weapons are prohibited are subject to a variety of criminal and civil sanctions.**

IT IS MOST ADVISABLE THAT THE MEMBERS OF A CHURCH SAFETY TEAM WHO CARRY WEAPONS BE OFF-DUTY OR RETIRED LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS.



- **CWP holders are permitted to carry on church property unless there is also a school on the property. In most states, carrying anywhere on school property is prohibited (except in vehicles, in some states), so when a church also has a school or a church meets on school property, this creates a “gray area” legally that is likely not specifically dealt with by state law, particularly since most churches are not meeting when school is in session.**

It is recommended that, should there be an armed safety team, only the members of the team be “officially” authorized to carry firearms on the church campus or in its buildings. Whatever a church determines its policy to be, it should be communicated clearly and thoroughly by means of signage and church literature.

Once it is determined that a church can legally have armed safety team members and serious consideration is being given to whether it should happen, several factors should weigh on the decision. As with anything else in a particular ministry, minimizing liability should be a priority whenever possible.

Church leaders must consider the insurance and legal ramifications of a firearm-related incident on their campus. It must be determined as soon as possible whether the church would even be covered and to what extent if such an incident were to occur.

One of its members acting in self-defense on the property could escape criminal prosecution while still exposing the church to a civil lawsuit.

LICENSING AS A SECURITY GUARD
DOES NOT AUTOMATICALLY GRANT THE
RIGHT TO CARRY A WEAPON.



Whenever possible, it is most advisable that the members of a church safety team who carry weapons be off-duty or retired law enforcement officers. Usually in the recruiting stage, a church will seek out members in that profession if they are not among the first ones to volunteer. This makes sense from a safety as well as a liability standpoint. When the church takes on the duty of providing security-type services, it must do so **“reasonably,”** and from a liability perspective, a church’s actions are more likely to be considered **“reasonable”** and less likely to be negligent if the persons it chooses to be responsible for protecting the congregation are those who have extensive weapons and emergency response training. Furthermore, when off-duty police officers respond to criminal activity, they are **“activated”** and are no longer agents of the church but rather agents of the state, dramatically reducing the church’s liability for their actions. If there are no current or former law enforcement officers in the congregation, it is a good idea to consider hiring off-duty officers.

Another option is hiring a private security company. The benefit of such a move is that its officers are likely to be better trained to handle emergency situations than regular church members, and their actions are less likely to be legally negligent than lay persons on the church safety team who have little training but are carrying concealed weapons, especially considering that many private security services contract with or employ off-duty police officers to provide their private security services.

OFTEN, PRIVATE SECURITY GUARDS
ARE HIRED BY THE CHURCH TO ACT AS
AGENTS FOR THE CHURCH.



However, similar to designated safety team members, private security guards that are hired by the church also act as agents for the church, so it is ultimately the church's responsibility to ensure that the security service is licensed, bonded, and insured and that its employees are trained in accordance with state legal requirements. Also note that licensing as a security guard does not automatically grant the right to carry a weapon. In most states, any person who carries a weapon, open or concealed, must have an individual permit to do so—a permit that is separate from his or her occupation as a police officer or security guard. It is the church's responsibility to ensure that persons carrying weapons who are providing security services for the congregation have a legal right to be carrying.

As a last resort, and only if none of the above options are available, some churches will consider having non-law-enforcement CWP holders carry weapons as part of their safety team responsibilities. Keep in mind, however, that in most states, obtaining a concealed weapon permit only requires a few hours of classes and a written or electronic test; ongoing classroom and field training are generally not required to maintain the permit to carry. Furthermore, most CWP holders have no real-life experience responding to armed conflict. Because of this, they have no idea the extent to which such a situation may affect their judgment, and they are far more likely to respond with excessive force or to otherwise respond inappropriately (and since these persons are acting as agents of the church, the church would likely be held responsible for their actions). For these reasons, it is not advisable for a church to place CWP holders on the safety team without first properly vetting them and then requiring ongoing weapons/firearm training that specifically focuses on armed conflict.

A CHURCH SECURITY CONSULTANT WHO IS AN EXPERIENCED PROFESSIONAL CAN WORK WITH A CHURCH AND IDENTIFY ITS STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES.



With that in mind, and with the intent to undertake all security/safety actions “reasonably,” there are a number of questions to ask when vetting potential safety team members who will be carrying weapons (this is not an exhaustive list and none of these are determinative factors; they are just issues to consider):

- **How long has this person been at the church? The NCLL recommends at least six months before being considered for any “sensitive” ministry position such as one dealing with safety, confidential issues, children, or finances.**
- **Has church leadership had ample time and opportunity to observe the person’s social interactions and family relationships before considering him or her for the safety team?**
- **Is this person easily angered? Easily offended? Obviously lacking in self-control?**
- **Does this person struggle with depression, mental illness, or thoughts of suicide?**
- **Does this person talk or act like a “gun-slinging vigilante”?**
- **Does this person have any law enforcement or military background? Has he or she been involved in armed conflict?**
- **What is this person’s family situation? Does he or she have a stable home/job situation?**
- **What is this person’s general reputation?**

IN MOST STATES, ANY PERSON WHO CARRIES A WEAPON, OPEN OR CONCEALED, MUST HAVE AN INDIVIDUAL PERMIT TO DO SO.



Once the previous factors (and others) have been considered, be sure to also take the following steps for each potential member of the safety team:

- **Have the person fill out a ministry application.**
- **Conduct a personal interview of the applicant with the head of the safety team and a member of church leadership.**
- **Obtain a comprehensive background check and update it every couple of years.**
- **Obtain personal references (coworkers, bosses, previous church pastors, etc.).**
- **Ensure the person has a valid concealed weapon permit in your state and keep a copy of the permit along with a copy of the person's driver's license.**
- **Request copies of records of any additional weapons/armed conflict training and/or certifications of the applicant, and if the person is chosen for the team, keep copies of all future training and certification records.**

There is no reason for church leaders to answer all of these questions by themselves. A church security consultant who is an experienced professional can work with a church and identify its strengths and weaknesses when it comes to safety, while also giving valuable guidance on the formation of a safety team and its preparation for service.

When the decision is made to have people with guns protecting the congregation, they need to be the best they can possibly be.