



Carrying Weapons in Church



RESOURCE BY:

Jim Howard, Executive Director, Trinity Security Allies

CARRYING WEAPONS IN CHURCH

“The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is with a good guy with a gun.” – Wayne LaPierre
“It’s the job of law enforcement to have guns and to decide when to shoot. You just do not want the average citizen carrying a gun in a crowded place.” – Michael Bloomberg

Two very conflicting statements made by two powerful men in the United States and these arguments cause more discussion in churches right now than whether to have a Safety Team in your church. I have worked with churches across the United States and there are those that embrace the fact that some of their members are carrying and others that would rather not know adopting the policy of “don’t ask, don’t tell”. Both thought processes could get you into a lot of trouble, legally and civilly.

When we break down Wayne LaPierre’s statement I couldn’t agree more. We will get into the justification for my opinion later in the booklet. LaPierre made his quoted statement after the Sandy Hook shooting, which in my opinion, was the worse time to argue the protection of gun rights. Let’s make sure we understand my position on gun rights. I believe every person who can legally possess a firearm to protect his or her family has rights, guaranteed under the 2nd Amendment of the United States Constitution, but we shouldn’t preach this after a tragedy like Sandy Hook. Let the politicians fight about this issue and we as voters vote on it at the ballot boxes. Stay informed of what is going on in your state and be ready to vote when the time comes. I see it this way; I followed all the rules, I obey the law and got my concealed carry permit. I consider myself a watchman on the wall. Nobody has to know that I carry, but in a time of need I have it and I am ready to give my all to protect those who need protection.

Now let’s take an analytical look at Bloomberg’s statement. I disagree with the first part of his statement, “It’s the job of law enforcement to have guns and decide when to shoot.” With all due respect Mr. Bloomberg, data related to national response times to violent crimes in America does not support your statement. The Bureau of Justice Statistics in a September 2019 report stated, on average the response time on 911 calls involving a violent crime is 10 minutes. If you look at the entire report, one of the more disturbing statistics is that 63.5% of response times to a violent crime can take from 6 minutes to 1 hour before law enforcement arrives.¹ Most attacks are well over by the time 1st responders arrive on the scene. I don’t know about you but if I know the average response time is 10 minutes and I only have seconds to save myself, one of my family members or an innocent person, I am acting. I will be happy to articulate my actions when the police arrive.

Next, let’s analyze the second part of Mr. Bloomberg’s statement, “You just do not want the average citizen carrying a gun in a crowded place.” I am not sure what he means by “average”, but in a way I agree with him. Before you stop reading this booklet because I said I agreed with Bloomberg, hear me out. I am a firearms instructor. I look for any excuse to go to the range. I love to shoot and hone my skill. But most “average” people cannot find the time to go to the range like me. So, in situations where “average” citizens think they can outdraw or outshoot a bad guy who does not care about life, his or yours, that average citizen should carefully consider their position. They will probably lose the gun battle. In the 10 years or so, we have seen citizens involved in shootings who have rose to the occasion. These citizens were quite likely better prepared than the average person, given the outcomes of the encounters. I am only going to look at two and then we need to talk about the pros and cons of having guns inside your church.

¹ The Best and Worst Police Response Times of 10 Major U.S. Cities <https://www.securitysales.com/news/best-worst-police-response-times/>

November 5, 2017, Sutherland Springs Baptist Church: If Stephen Willeford had not responded from his home across the street from the Sutherland Springs Baptist Church on that day more people would have died. What some people don't know is the shooter went into the church, shot everyone that was there, had went back out to his vehicle to reload. The shooter then came back inside the church and started to execute those that were still alive. As he was heading outside another time, possibly to get more ammo and continue killing people, he was confronted by Stephen Willeford. Stephen Willeford is an NRA firearms instructor and "good guy with a gun" who had the presence of mind, training and alertness to see the shooter had on a ballistic vest with no side panels. That is where Stephen placed his first shot. Stephen Willeford's intervention caused the shooter retreat to his truck and attempt to flee.

The second case I want to discuss is the recent shooting at West Freeway Church of Christ in White Settlement, Texas. Jack Wilson, an armed safety team leader of the church was able to take down the shooter before he could shoot another member of his church. The shooter had already killed two members of the church. As he started to run toward the front of the church, Jack, another NRA firearms instructor, stopped the threat by taking down the shooter. Both of these heroes are "above average" because of their training. However, if you watch the rest of the video of the West Freeway Church of Christ shooting you see several examples of the "average people" Bloomberg is talking about. It is very fortunate that a member of the church was not shot by an accidental discharge from an armed church member.

So, let's break down why we really need guns in church. Remember the national average of response time for first responders to arrive at a violent crime? The Bureau of Justice Statistics reported the average response times on 911 calls involving a violent crime is 10 minutes. Think about what Clint Smith, President and Director of Thunder Ranch, said, "When seconds count, the cops are just minutes away." The shooting in White Settlement was over in less than 15 seconds. According to Julie Workman, a survivor of the shooting in Sutherland Springs Baptist Church, it was 15 minutes before the first responder came into the church after the shooter had left the church and the massacre had stopped. This reason alone gives you enough justification to have armed safety team members in your church.

So, when we begin the conversation with our church leaders about forming a safety team and allowing our safety team members to carry weapons in the church we have to consider a couple of things. First, we need to make sure that it is legal to have a weapon in your church. What, if anything, does your state law say regarding whether people may carry concealed weapons in church? Check with an attorney if you have any questions on this issue. Make sure you are covered legally. The last thing you want, if you have a church shooting, is for you or your brothers and sisters to be charged criminally and or sued.

Second, church leaders must consider the insurance and legal ramifications of a firearm-related incident on their campus. Church leaders must make sure that the church would be covered legally and financially and whether coverage is adequate prior to an incident. One church member, acting in self-defense might escape criminal prosecution while still exposing the church to a civil lawsuit. One example is a recent shooting by a safety team member at a Tampa mosque. The victim's wife has sued the mosque for negligence due to a lack of training in crisis intervention, proper administration of lethal and non-lethal force for security volunteers and maintaining safe conditions at the mosque.

If the church does not want to form its own safety team, another option is hiring off-duty police officers or a security company. If the church can afford the cost of those services, this option can

alleviate some of the issues of liability. However, churches must understand they can be still be sued regardless of the choice. The cost of hiring off-duty police officers is not an affordable option for a lot of small churches. I have also heard from churches that hiring off-duty officers is difficult because of high demand for officers and the lack of resources of area agencies. Even if you are able to hire an off-duty officer you should still have a safety team to work hand-in-hand to watch the flock. We hire two deputies to direct traffic for our church. They are also used to watch the property. There have been times however, because of other area events, we have not been able to fill those positions, so the safety team is solely responsible for the well-being of the church.

As mentioned earlier another option is to hire a private security company. Even though this is a cost saving option than hiring sworn law enforcement officers, you must be careful when selecting a private security company. Most private security personal are good hard-working people, however it is imperative that a thorough vetting process for selection of the security company be employed. Jesus, Himself describes it best in John 10:12 *"The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So, when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it"*. When it comes down to protecting the church, we refer back to Nehemiah 4:13 *"Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows."* Nehemiah posted them with their weapons of the day. Who better to protect your church than you own armed family?

One option that should not be considered is selecting everyone who has a concealed weapon permit in your church be your safety team. This is a true recipe for disaster. While reviewing recent safety videos from church trainings and shootings, it is clear that using a quantity over quality mindset causes significantly higher liability issues than forming a safety team and providing the necessary training to guarantee the safety of your flock. Churches that form safety teams need to let the congregation know there is a safety team and an armed response to a violent situation is possible. Church members not affiliated with the safety team need to be told not to display a weapon while on church property. Display of weapons by those other than safety team members could prompt the member to become a perceived threat if safety team members do not recognize the armed person as a church member. In larger churches there is a very high probability of not knowing all armed members of your church. This information needs to be clearly communicated to all members of the church by church leadership. It is vital to make sure there is a clear understanding that the church has a safety team and some of the members are armed.

When forming your safety team, look for current and retired law enforcement officers or military personal who attend your houses of worship. Enlisting the assistance of these individuals will help more rapidly create the safety team ministry. Remember this is a ministry like any other ministry in your church and should be considered as such. Speak to current or retired law enforcement or military personal about running the safety team or being at least an advisor due to their training. Enlisting persons who may already have training and experience that qualifies them for safety team members 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 conscious perspective. A church's actions are more likely to be considered "reasonable" and less likely to be negligent if the individuals it chooses to be responsible for protecting the congregation are those who have extensive public safety and emergency response training.

All of these points lead us to the subject of having the proper safety training for churches and houses of worship. With or without proper training a church runs the risk of being sued when a safety team member has to use his or her weapon. Litigation can be greatly reduced if there is a history of the delivery of a high-quality training program. The training program should be focused

on being proactive and watching for those that may come into your church to do harm. Policy and procedures should be in place that state all safety team members must do some sort of active shooter training by a reputable company can help reduce liability. James Simmons with Simmons Law Group explains the importance of church firearm training. *"Unfortunately, a Church runs the risk of being sued whenever a safety team member fires their weapon. However, legal liability exposure is greatly reduced when safety team members are trained by professionals, there is proper documentation, and safety protocols are followed. Therefore, by being proactive and vigilant, you reduce the possibility of violence and mitigate the Church's legal liability."*

Training like Situational Awareness, Threat Profiling, Verbal De-escalating and using tools such as Laser Shot shoot don't shoot simulators assists safety team members with becoming proactive and not reactive in reducing violent encounters. It is critical that we employ the assistance of reputable companies that make church safety their primary focus. If the company's main focus is not the expansion of the kingdom of God, be leery of their training techniques. Church safety teams are not a police department or a military unit, they are servants of God and the church. A person in need can be mis-identified as a possible threat. If handled incorrectly and without compassion the encounter can lead to severe legal or civil liability, not to mention the missed opportunity to minister to someone in need. We cannot stress the importance of proper training from Christian based organizations like Trinity Security Allies.

Training records must be maintained to show that the safety team members have appropriate training. It is always good to have a litigation attorney come in and talk about your risk. A good attorney can help weigh the risk of not protecting your flock compared to doing the right thing and protecting the congregation against those that might come into your houses of worship to do harm. Remember that individuals who come into your houses of worship have a reasonable expectation to be safe while on your property.

When considering the recruitment of safety team members in your church, there are a number of questions and policies that must be put into place to accurately vet potential safety team members who may or may not be carrying weapons (this is not an exhaustive list and none of these alone are determinative factors; they are just issues to consider):

- Must be a member of good standing with the church. Visitors of the church are not eligible for a position on the safety team.
- New members of the church without prior law enforcement or military experience must volunteer somewhere in the church for 6 months before being considered to become a safety team member. This allows safety team leaders to observe the person's social interactions and family relationships before considering him/her for the safety team.
- When vetting possible new members of the safety team certain personal questions must be ask:
 - Does this person struggle with depression, mental illness, or thoughts of suicide?
 - Does this person talk or act like a "gun-slinging vigilante"?
 - What is this person's family situation? Does he or she have a stable home/job situation?
 - What is this person's general reputation?
- A comprehensive background check will be required every two 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.
- If a team member decides they want to carry a weapon that must be discussed with

the team leaders and church staff and a qualified firearms instructor needs to take the team member to the range and validate the team members safe handling and accuracy of firing the firearm before that team member can carry on property.

All safety team members must realize this is not a position of power but a ministry of serving others. This is not a position that you ask for, this is a position that the Holy Spirit moves you toward and must not be taken lightly. Safety team leaders and safety team members must follow Paul's rules of being an elder listed in Titus. In Titus 1:6-9 Paul states "*An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer manages God's household, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.*"

In closing. All safety team members should hold themselves accountable to a high standard. When carrying a firearm inside the church to protect the flock, armed team members must understand that they are held to a higher standard because of the power they hold. We must not take this position lightly. Remember we are working on expanding the kingdom of God, all glory is to Him and we are his watchmen/watchwomen over His Bride. Remember "*Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.*" 1 Peter 5:2-4.