

Open and Concealed Carry
in Churches and Schools

Episcopal Diocese of West Texas
December, 2015

This document includes two sections.

Part 1 is a statement from the bishops.

Part 2 provides a summary of the actions required.

**Please take time to carefully read both sections of this
document.**

Part 1: Statement from the Bishops

New legislation in the State of Texas permitting the open carry of handguns in churches becomes effective on January 1, 2016. The new law does not change the current Federal and State law prohibiting gun carry in schools or in churches that have a school on the same property as the church except under very limited circumstances.

The issue of handguns on church property has spiritual and pastoral components, as well as legal components. We offer the following thoughts to assist clergy, vestries, and bishop's committees in your consideration of the spiritual and pastoral dimensions of this topic; and as you consider what is best for your particular church family.

At the heart of the matter, this is a pastoral issue for a Christian community and should be handled with great sensitivity. In all instances, churches and schools must be mindful of the spiritual health and safety of their communities. Congregational and school life have many dimensions, including the ability to defuse dangerous situations and do all in our power to prevent harm. We wish that the state law had not permitted open carry of handguns into churches. Personally, we believe places of worship should remain holy sanctuaries and gun-free zones, with appropriate exceptions for law enforcement personnel.

We urge vestries and bishop's committees to have prayerful, theological, and biblical reflection on these matters. Examples from scripture which we find helpful to such a discussion include:

Isaiah 2.4, Micah 4.3 *turning swords into plowshares, spears to pruning hooks*

Matthew 5.9 *blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God*

Philippians 4.5 *let your gentleness be known to all*

Colossians 3.15 *let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts*

1 Corinthians 10.23: *All things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial. All things are lawful, but not all things build up*

Philippians 2.4 *let each of you look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others*

Philippians 1.27-28 *let your manner of life be worthy of the Gospel of Christ...and not frightened in anything by your opponents*

Luke 22 and John 18 *at Jesus' arrest, his followers use the sword, to which Jesus responds, "No more of this" (Luke 22.51); and "Put your sword into its sheath" (John 18.11)*

While Jesus showed particular concern for the weak and vulnerable - and calls us to do the same - his response to violence and oppression was not violence, but love. Sometimes in life, the temptation arises to respond to threats of violence with power and counter-violence, but Jesus calls us to follow him in a different way.

Questions for a discussion of these matters might include such things as: "Where do we put our trust?" "What issues are present in our society/world that would lead a person to feel the need to carry a gun in a worship service or on church or school property?" "How might the Church be a place of example to a broken world?" "Who is my neighbor?" "What is my responsibility to my neighbor?" "As the Body of Christ, what is one member's responsibility to another? To the whole community?"

In all we do, may we seek the humility, grace, and mind of our Lord Jesus Christ, who said, *"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me"* (Matthew 25.40).

Part 2: Action to be taken by vestries and bishop's committees

Beginning January 1, 2016, Texans with a handgun license will be allowed to openly carry their handguns. Churches in Texas may prevent handgun license

holders from carrying handguns inside their church buildings as long as the church gives proper notice, which can either be given orally or through the posting of signs meeting prescribed standards, or both.

Special note pertaining to our congregations with parochial schools: *Under Federal Law, schools remain gun-free zones. If your church includes a school on the same property as the church, both your church and school are automatically gun-free zones. Therefore, the posting of signage to restrict carrying a gun is not necessary to comply with the new law. Individuals, with very limited exceptions, are already prohibited from carrying a gun on your property, whether open carry or concealed. However, churches with schools on their property certainly may post signage to ban the carrying of guns if they so choose.*

Each church without a parochial school on its premises may decide for itself whether to :

- (a) prohibit handguns regardless of whether they are carried openly or concealed.
- (b) allow both open and concealed carry of handguns.
- (c) allow concealed carry of handguns but not open carry.
- (d) allow open carry of handguns but not concealed carry.

Considerations for Vestries and Bishop's Committees:

1. If a vestry or bishop's committee desires to prohibit the open carry and/or concealed carry of firearms on church premises, we recommend that the vestry or bishop's committee pass a resolution to that effect and also designate the persons authorized (for example, clergy, vestry, vestry of the day, usher, etc) to give oral notice that open carry and/or concealed carry of firearms are not permitted on church premises. The designation of which persons are authorized to give notice can be very broad - for example, every member of the parish or mission could be authorized to give notice of prohibition. In addition, it would be wise to notify the parish or mission of the action taken by the vestry or bishop's committee.

2. Giving oral notice, either in place of or in addition to signage, is allowed under the new law. If your church desires to post signs that your church prohibits open carry or concealed carry or both, Texas Penal Code Sections 30.06 and 30.07 provide clear rules for these signs which notify handgun license holders that your church is a gun-free zone or concealed carry only, as applicable.

3. A church does not need to take any action if it wishes to allow handgun license holders to conceal and open carry in church buildings.