

Church Gun Outreaches Draw Fire

With gun control debates raging, churches that use gun classes as an outreach tool are under siege.

Pryor Creek Community Church, in Pryor, Okla., is one of a few dozen churches around the country offering concealed carry certification classes as a way to reach non-Christians and attract new members. Pastor Derek Melton, who previously served as the assistant chief of police in Pryor, sees no conflict between being a Christian and possessing weapons.

"The disciples carried weapons," Melton says. "Peter cut a man's ear off. I believe if more honest citizens were armed, the safer our communities would be."

Pastors in churches across the country, including congregations in Oklahoma, North Carolina, Ohio and Texas, share Melton's position. But in the wake of the December massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., in which a gunman killed 20 first-graders and six adults, such sentiments are drawing sharp criticism from fellow Christians.

One such detractor is Richard Cizik of the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good. "I understand where the people who disagree with me are coming from," Cizik says, "but what these churches are proposing compromises the essential message of the gospel: that Jesus was first of all a peacemaker."

But Ryan Bennett, senior pastor of Faith Baptist Church in Lexington, N.C., doesn't believe offering these classes contradicts the gospel message. His congregation has offered them in the past and will offer them again, he says.

Bennett is frank in describing the classes as outreach.

"Outreach is the only reason we do it," he says. "We've had two classes of 80 people each, and we have a waiting list and calls coming in all the time."

Though Pryor Creek and Faith Baptist are the subjects of local criticism, both pastors shrug it off.

"The church can't really do anything without being criticized," Bennett says. "Our local paper ran letters to the editor with negative reactions. Our people knew it wasn't about bringing pistols to church, though; it was about outreach."

Cizik, who was a top official at the National Association of Evangelicals before forming the New Evangelical Partnership, says he takes issue with churches using weapons training as a means of reaching non-Christians.

"I grew up in gun country," he says. "I am not intrinsically anti-Second Amendment; however, this seems to be an ethically suspect message. The gospel should be 'Put your faith in Christ.' This seems to be 'Put your faith in Glock.' "

Even so, Cizik says he believes gun ownership and even concealed carry permits are matters of personal judgment, with the main issue concerning the church's role in it. "The church has always used a variety of methods for drawing people in," he says. "However, I do think that there are plenty of organizations more suitable that could be doing the training."

Both Bennett and Melton allow concealed carry in their churches, but say they don't actively encourage it.

"I don't consider myself a right-wing extremist," Melton says. "I'm also sure there are plenty of people who disagree with me, but we see this as a service to our community, not a way of encouraging concealed carry in churches."

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