

Bringing guns to church

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [March 8, 2011](#) issue

The way pastor Jonathan Wilkins sees it, members of his Baptist church in Thomaston, Georgia, should have the right to carry guns into worship services to protect the congregation. Wilkins's Baptist Tabernacle and a Georgia gun-rights association are challenging a new state law that prohibits weapons in houses of worship. A lower court ruled against them in January; the case is headed for appeal.

"What we're fighting for is not that just any old body can carry guns in church," Wilkins said. "We would be responsible. We would want people who are trained, and so forth, to carry, people that we designate for protective purposes."

Recently, state legislatures in Georgia, Michigan and Louisiana have been caught in the debate over gun rights and gun control as they consider allowing weapons in houses of worship. Though gun-rights proponents think they have both the First and Second Amendments on their side, they also cite the rights of religious organizations as property owners. Opponents, meanwhile, worry that having weapons in worship is a step on a slippery slope to permitting them everywhere.

A month after then-Georgia governor Sonny Perdue signed the 2010 law listing places of worship among "unauthorized" locations for carrying weapons, Governor Bobby Jindal of Louisiana took the opposite tack. Louisiana law now permits trained worshipers to bring guns into churches, mosques and synagogues as long as fellow congregants are informed.

Meanwhile, other states are mulling whether to scale back restrictions on weapons.

In

Michigan, gun rights activists are pushing for a change in the law that would make it possible to carry guns in worship services without prior permission from a presiding official.

Mike Thiede, spokesman for

Michigan Gun Owners and a member of a Baptist church, said he spoke to legislators in favor of changing the law after a church secretary was assaulted and a pastor was tied up during a robbery at another church.

"I just thought it was a terrible situation for people to be in," he said. "Outside that door, they could protect themselves, but inside that door, they could be a victim."

Other crimes have prompted greater

interest in new legislation. In 2009 alone, abortion doctor and usher George Tiller was shot in the foyer of his Lutheran church in Kansas; Fred Winters was killed in his Illinois pulpit; and another minister, Carol Daniels, was found dead in her Oklahoma church.

"When you

see things like that happening over and over again, churches are saying, 'What are we supposed to do?'" said Jeffrey Hawkins, executive director of the Virginia-based Christian Security Network.

Hawkins's

organization reported seven homicides in churches in 2010, but while he supports crime-prevention techniques, Hawkins does not advocate allowing worshippers to carry guns into church. "You go into somewhere crowded, like a church, and there's three people who have guns out that are shooting at each other," he said. "How's the police officer going to be able to discern who's . . . the bad guy?"

Laura Cutilletta, senior

staff attorney of the San Francisco-based Legal Community Against Violence, said many states remain silent on weapons and worship. But she went on to say gun lobbyists have become more vocal advocates for permitting weapons not only in churches but in other public places, such as parking lots and bars.

"Guns don't have a place in public, especially places like churches and bars and places where a lot of people are congregating," she said. "An unintentional shooting could end up injuring many people."

Laws about weapons in houses of worship vary widely. Some states forbid firearms in religious buildings, but others permit them unless a congregation has posted a sign disallowing them. Still others say they're permitted if the pastor, priest or rabbi gives the OK. And the penalties are just as varied, with some "like a traffic ticket" and other violations considered a felony, Hawkins said.

In Virginia, carrying a gun in a house of worship is allowed unless a service is being conducted. If there is a service, "good and sufficient reason"—a term left undefined in the code—is required. "We think our law is actually broad enough that there's no great urgency to try to change it," said Philip Van Cleave, president of the Virginia Citizens Defense League, a gun-rights group.

In Mississippi, several bills that were introduced to remove churches from a list of prohibited places for weapons died in committee, but at least one bill continues to be debated. "It seems to me that our law that explicitly prohibits acts in a church that are perfectly legal outside the church clearly violates the First Amendment in addition to the Second," said Jeff Pittman, vice president of the Mississippi State Firearm Owners Association.