



WISCONSIN COUNCIL
OF CHURCHES
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DATE: Thursday, February 20, 2020
TO: Senate Committee on Insurance, Financial Services, Government Oversight and Courts
FROM: Peter Bakken, Justice and Witness Coordinator, Wisconsin Council of Churches
RE: Senate Bill 822, Concealed Weapons in Places of Worship

I write on behalf of the Wisconsin Council of Churches to express our opposition to Senate Bill 822.

The Wisconsin Council of Churches (WCC) is a network of Christian churches and faith-based organizations committed to working together across our many differences. The Council connects 20 Christian traditions, which have approximately 2,000 congregations and over one million church members in Wisconsin.

Senate Bill 822 would allow a person who has a license to carry a concealed weapon to bring a firearm into a place of worship, even if that place of worship is located on school grounds. We appreciate the sponsors' concerns for the safety of our parishioners, but we cannot agree with this approach.

Fundamental to our opposition is the conviction that our places of worship must be true sanctuaries: places of peace, reconciliation, and hospitality. As followers of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, our churches witness to the faith that the solution to violence is not the threat of more violence. Our congregations live out their belief that there are more loving, creative and intelligent ways to seek safety and security.

Simply having more firearms on a church or school's premises increases the risk of accidental or unintentional shootings. Even highly-trained individuals can make tragic errors of judgement in chaotic or ambiguous situations; how much more may persons who have not been rigorously trained on how to respond in active shooter situations. For many congregants, the knowledge that someone in the next pew is armed will not make them feel safer, or increase their confidence that they are enfolded in a gracious community of love and acceptance.

Even though, under this legislation, churches on school property could choose to post signs prohibiting firearms in their buildings or on their grounds, those very signs undermine that sense of sanctuary and environment of peace. Moreover, deciding whether or not to post signs can be a divisive issue in many congregations. A church or school that posts firearm restrictions could be exposed to liability if there were to be an act of violence on its property; one that did not could be exposed to liability if it was unable to ensure that everyone bringing a weapon on to the premises was properly licensed.

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The Wisconsin Council of Churches has just released a new study-action guide *Who is My Neighbor? Multigenerational Conversations on Faith & Gun Violence*, which can be downloaded from our website. It includes a section on “Church Security and Safer Church Resources,” which recommends alternatives to armed guards and concealed weapons, such as incorporating intruder/active shooter preparation into church emergency plans, consulting with local law enforcement, and RUN, HIDE, FIGHT as best practice for responding to a violent incident. These approaches strike a faithful balance between hospitality and peacefulness on the one hand, and intelligent watchfulness and preparation on the other.

We believe that such measures are more effective in reducing harm and more in keeping with the faith of our churches than is the approach taken in SB 822. In spite of its stated intent, this legislation will not enhance the safety or security of our churches, and it will undermine our churches’ witness to and pursuit of “the things that make for peace.” (Romans 14:19)

We appreciate this opportunity to express our concerns.