

Gun-Loving Pastor: Piece Be With You

A Kentucky pastor is inviting his flock to bring guns to church to celebrate the Fourth of July.

By AP Staff,

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. – A Kentucky pastor is inviting his flock to bring guns to church to celebrate the Fourth of July and the Second Amendment.

New Bethel Church is welcoming "responsible handgun owners" to wear their firearms inside the church June 27, a Saturday. An ad says there will be a handgun raffle, patriotic music and information on gun safety.

"We're just going to celebrate the upcoming theme of the birth of our nation," said pastor Ken Pagano. "And we're not ashamed to say that there was a strong belief in God and firearms -- without that this country wouldn't be here."

The guns must be unloaded and private security will check visitors at the door, Pagano said. He said recent church shootings, including the killing Sunday of a late-term abortion provider in Kansas, which he condemned, highlight the need to promote safe gun ownership.

The New Bethel Church event was planned months before Dr. George Tiller was shot to death in a Wichita church.

Kentucky allows residents to openly carry guns in public with some restrictions. Gun owners carrying concealed weapons must have state-issued permits and can't take them to schools, jails or bars, among other exceptions.

Pagano's Protestant church, which attracts up to 150 people to Sunday services, is a member of the Assemblies of God. The former Marine and handgun instructor said he expected some backlash, but has heard only a "little bit" of criticism of the gun event. John Phillips, an Arkansas pastor who was shot twice while leading a service at his former church in 1986, said a house of worship is no place for firearms. "A church is designated as a safe haven, it's a place of worship," said Phillips, who was shot by a church member's relative for an unknown reason and still has a bullet lodged in his spine.

"It is unconscionable to me to think that a church would be a place that you would even want to bring a weapon."

Phillips spoke out against a bill before the Arkansas General Assembly that would have permitted the carrying of guns in that state's churches. The bill failed in February.

Pagano, 50, said some members of his church were concerned that President Obama's administration could restrict gun ownership, and they supported the plan for the event when Pagano asked their opinion.

Marian McClure Taylor, executive director of the Kentucky Council of Churches, an umbrella organization for 11 Christian denominations in Kentucky, said Christian churches are promoters of peace, but "most allow for arms to be taken up under certain conditions."

Taylor said Pagano assured her the event would focus on promoting responsible gun ownership and any proceeds would go to charity.

"Those two commitments are consistent with the high value the Assemblies of God churches place on human life," she said in an e-mail message.

Pagano is encouraging church members to bring a canned good and a friend to the event. He said guns must be unloaded for insurance purposes and safety reasons. He said the point was not to mix worship with guns, though he may reference some passages from the Bible.

"Firearms can be evil and they can be useful," he said. "We're just trying to promote responsible gun ownership and gun safety."