

Court upholds Georgia ban on guns in church

by [Tom Ehrich](#) in the [August 22, 2012](#) issue

A federal appeals court has upheld Georgia's ban on bringing guns into places of worship. Jonathan Wilkins, pastor of the Baptist Tabernacle of Thomaston, and a gun-rights group had argued that church members should have the right to carry guns into worship services to protect the congregation.

But the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled July 20 that a Georgia law adopted in 2010 does not violate the Thomaston congregation's First and Second Amendment rights. Gun-rights advocates might want a weapon for self-defense, but that is a "personal preference, motivated by a secular purpose," the court ruled.

While the idea of carrying a gun to church might strike most clergy and lay members as unthinkable, the Episcopal Church's General Convention, which ended July 12, adopted a resolution that asks "every parish and every diocesan place of work to declare their establishments as Gun Free Zones."

The resolution noted that some states allow people to bring weapons into church under certain conditions. Parishes and dioceses were urged to post "easily visible" Gun Free Zone decals "to exercise private property rights on behalf of community safety," according to Episcopal News Service.

The appeals court ruling was criticized by minister Jerry Henry, executive director of GeorgiaCarry.org, who said his organization is mulling over an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court. "We think they've got it wrong again," he said July 24, adding that in his view "the church's First Amendment right prevails over the state right to tell them what they can and cannot do."

The appeals court also rejected arguments about the constitutional amendment permitting U.S. citizens to bear arms. "A place of worship's right, rooted in the common law, to forbid possession of firearms on its property is entirely consistent with the Second Amendment," the court said. —RNS